1 Bushmen
Unity and Diversity

The most important thing to note about 'Bushmen' or 'San' is that they are not a single ethnic group. They are several such groups. They speak a diversity of languages, which are more different from each other than Hindi or Sanskrit is from English. Genetically, Bushmen are in fact the most diverse 'people' on the planet (see Hublin *et al*. 2017). Also, they have many different patterns of settlement, some of which are *opposites* in terms of seasonal aggregations and dispersals. They have a wide range of kinship systems too, and these are as complex as anywhere on earth outside Australia. They even possess a variety of economic practices, not just in terms of hunting and gathering but also through gift exchange. And their social values are often the *reverse* of expectations about what we in the West assume is 'normal' and 'natural'. Given that they have lived in southern Africa for at least 25,000 or maybe 50,000 years, why should we expect otherwise?

The subcontinent is difficult to define exactly, but the distance from the Cape to the Cunene, for instance, is nearly 3,000 kilometres. It is bounded by rivers, and in between is the Kalahari – a plateau consisting of a vast sand system. This includes the landlocked Republic of Botswana, which became independent from the United Kingdom in 1966. To the west is another desert, the Namib, from which the Republic of Namibia takes its name. Namibia was German from 1884 to 1915, then a UN Mandated Territory under the control of South Africa until the eve of independence in 1990. The Republic of South Africa gained its own freedom from apartheid in 1994. To the east lies a tropical ocean and a former Portuguese colony, the Republic of Mozambique, and a former British colony, the Republic of Zimbabwe. Two further countries in the region are the Kingdom of Lesotho and the Kingdom of Eswatini (Swaziland). The latter reflects a recent name change, but both names are still in use. It is also landlocked, and Lesotho lies completely within the boundaries of South Africa. To the north are the Republic of Angola, a Portuguese colony for 400 years (1575–1975), and the Republic of Zambia, formerly British. The latter has had a chequered history and was the site of various kingdoms. These followed Khoisan habitation to about AD 300 and the arrival of Bantu-speaking groups in the twelfth century. Most of southern Africa is Bantu-speaking. Bantu is a large

language family, and Bantu languages are spread across most of Africa through recent centuries. Their point of origin was around modern Cameroon. The remaining languages spoken by Bushmen are very tiny in terms of numbers of speakers, though vast in their diversity.

Bushmen as a Unity

We often tend to think of Bushmen as a unity. This is not as strange as it may seem, for all such groups share a common origin as an original hunting-and-gathering population (or populations) of southern Africa. Their diversity includes biological difference (there are 'black' as well as 'yellow' or 'red' people among them), linguistic affiliation (some speak Khoe or so-called Hottentot languages rather than 'San' ones) and so on. Even what we call them reflects a kind of diversity. Many experts, especially in archaeology, call them 'San', a term derived from the word *saan* or *sān* (common gender plural) in Khoekhoe dialects. It occurs in no Bushman or San language. Other experts prefer to use Bushmen or Basarwa, and a few have used Kua or even N/uakhoe (literally, 'red people'). Kua is the preferred generic term in a few languages. Red People is a fairly common self-description in my own fieldwork language, Naro (formerly known as Nharo or Naron). Etymologically though, each of these terms is quite problematic. This introductory chapter will explore all these issues and some related ones.

Like Bushmen, we are all hunter-gatherers in our essence. That is, modern humans have existed for about 200,000 years (the traditional date) or perhaps for much longer. For at least half of this time we modern humans lived as a symbolic species, with language, animistic beliefs and symbolism at the core of our self-awareness. There is recent evidence that humans have existed more than 100,000 years longer than that, thanks to a study from Jebel Irhoud, in Morocco. Through thermoluminescence dating, it appears that modern humans have lived there since around 315,000 BP (Hublin *et al*. 2017). The implication is that humans were spread across Africa, rather than just in eastern or southern parts of the continent. The data suggest further that early modern humans, and the symbolic culture they possessed, had an origin in the Middle Stone Age. This was a long and Africa-specific period of human prehistory. We shall learn more about it in Chapter 3.

Early Humans and Bushmen

It may be tempting to imagine that early humans and Bushmen are much the same. They are not! If Bushmen possess attributes of early humans, so do the rest of us. There is little that is 'early' about Bushmen: they are fully modern people. What does set them apart is a dependence for subsistence on hunting

and gathering, or *mainly* on hunting and gathering. Yet this comes with a large number of attributes of Middle Stone Age life that are retained by Bushmen, even today.

'Middle Stone Age' and 'Mesolithic' may literally mean the same thing, but they are not identical. The Middle Stone Age was the period when humans *became* modern. It marks the beginning of symbolism, personal decoration, art, language and so on, in eastern and southern Africa. It took place perhaps around 280,000 BP and lasted until 50,000 or 25,000 BP (see McBrearty and Brooks 2000). The Mesolithic is largely technological and marks the beginnings of the use of smaller stone tools and changes in hunting techniques. It took place much later, more like 15,000 to 5,000 BP in Europe and similar dates elsewhere in the world (Bailey and Spikins 2008).

Another version of human evolution comes from work on the Dali skull, discovered in 1978 in northern China but only fully analysed much more recently (Arthreya and Wu 2017). This suggests a high degree of hybridization and gene flow among Chinese hominins. There is also some hybridization among Denisovans (descendants of *Homo heidelbergensis*), Neanderthals and *Homo sapiens*, indicating further genetic complexity (see Barnard 2012: 118–20). However, the crucial thing is what effect any of this might have had on symbolic thought and behaviour, including the development of any kind of language. Here, at least, it is African data that is at the forefront. Africans exhibit greater phonological diversity than any other part of the world. Within Africa, Bushmen show this to a greater extent than anywhere else. This suggests that their languages are of greater time depth than those of anywhere else (Atkinson 2011). The presence of language is, of course, closely related to the origins of symbolism, and it would appear that both of these, language and symbolic thinking, did indeed originate in eastern or southern Africa (see also Stringer 2011: 105–37; Barnard 2016b: 73–8). There is more work to be done on issues such as these, but there is no doubt that science is gradually coming to firmer conclusions.

Food production only came into being with the Neolithic, roughly 12,000 years ago (depending on how it is defined). The technology that first produced it is hardly natural. The archaeologist-filmmaker team of Peter Nilssen and Craig Foster (2017: 2) put it this way:

> [H]umans lived in and connected with nature for at least 95 per cent of our time on earth. It is only the last five per cent or so that we have been manipulating nature for our own short-term benefit, to the long-term detriment of life in general. It is hardly surprising then that most of us find comfort, peace and joy in nature as opposed to the discontent associated with the sights, sounds and smells of industry and modern life. Our deep-seated relationship with nature, and 95 per cent of our genetic coding and heritage, is part of the original human design – gatherer-hunters are at the core of who and what we are.

Gatherer-hunters is simply another way of saying hunter-gatherers, less sexist perhaps because most such populations subsist mainly by gathering. That is done mainly by females. Nilssen and Foster (2017: 4) go on to suggest that early humans had two 'ingredients in their recipe for success'. These were: (1) cognition through intelligence and (2) symbolic behaviour, evidenced through their belief systems and their spirituality. We can still see these in the animistic elements of Bushman religions today, including trance dancing. This is depicted in rock paintings, the earliest form of art in southern Africa.

Bushmen, therefore, are at the apex of human culture. In genetic terms, Bushmen are the most diverse population, or sets of populations, anywhere. This means that they are the groups that the rest of modern humanity is descended from. More specifically, the Israeli geneticist Doron Behar and his team (Behar *et al*. 2008; cf. Pickrell *et al.* 2012) argue that Khoisan populations diverged from other populations through the paternal line sometime between 150,000 and 90,000 years ago. The maternal line remained separate until around 40,000 years ago. Yet, as all this implies, Bushmen are not a single ethnic group but several. We must forget about the idea that 'the Bushmen' are a uniform bunch of people. Except in religious belief and practice, they are in fact quite *diverse*. Religion is excepted because it is similar throughout Bushman culture.

Bushmen are not particularly small in stature. They do tend to be fairly light-skinned, although many are dark-skinned. Above all, descriptions like 'Bush crania' as 'sub-doliochcephalic, metriocephalic, orthognatic, mesomeme, platyrhine, leptostaphylinic, cryptozygous, and microcephalic' (Shrubsall 1898: 280) should, of course, be consigned to history. There is no 'typical' Bushman. Indeed, as the study by Behar's team shows, Bushmen are genetically diverse. The reason why the rest of us are so similar is due to what biological anthropologist Marta Mirazón Lahr has labelled the 'Holocene filter'. This similarity is due, in other words, to the adoption of farming for subsistence (see also Scerri 2018). And finally here, and importantly, we should forget about a lot of what we imagine Bushmen to be. Their struggle for freedom from all encumbrances is pretty obvious. But it also entails a choice they make, *for doing less work*: they work far less than we in the West do, only about two to three hours a day. As one expert has said, they eat more meat than Texans. That said, their nutrition is very good. If there is a true struggle for existence, it is among their agricultural neighbours. Peoples with cultivation, rather than hunter-gatherers, are the ones who tend to be most affected by drought.

How Many Bushmen Are There? What Should We Call Them?

This is a more complicated question than we might imagine. We do tend to think of Bushmen as a unity. In a way, this is not as strange as it may seem, for

all Bushman or San groups do share a common origin as the original hunting-and-gathering populations of southern Africa. For a variety of reasons though, it is extremely difficult to estimate their numbers. There are about 90,000 in total, with significant populations including some 55,000 in Botswana, 27,000 in Namibia, 10,000 in South Africa (many of them being migrants from Angola and Namibia), fewer than 5,000 in Angola and about 1,200 in Zimbabwe. There are also small numbers in Zambia and Lesotho, and in South Africa near the Swazi border. Megan Biesele and Robert Hitchcock (2011: 4) give a total Bushman population of 96,800 in 2010, with numbers by country of 48,000 in Botswana, 34,000 in Namibia, 7,500 in South Africa, 3,500 in Angola, 2,500 in Zimbabwe and 1,300 in Zambia. These figures come from survey work done by the Working Group for Indigenous Minorities in Southern Africa. For the sake of comparison, remember that Botswana is about the same size as France and has a total population of just over 2,000,000 (including the 48,000 Bushmen). France has a population of around 67,000,000.

The present estimates for population groups are shown in Table 1.1, and the locations of the most prominent groups are illustrated in Figure 1.1. These details are the ones proposed by the linguist Matthias Brenzinger (2007: 188–90; see also Güldemann 2014: 40–1; Lee, Hitchcock and Biesele 2002b: 10). However, there do seem to some anomalies. Brenzinger says that about 10,000 people have Ju/'hoan (which he refers to as !Xũ) as their first language, whereas other authorities claim a rather higher figure. (The people are referred to as Ju/'hoansi, whereas their language is simply Ju/'hoan.) Interestingly too, Brenzinger (Brenzinger 2007: 186) gives a figure for Naro (including Ts'ao or Ts'aokhoe) of 9,000 and notes that about the same number have Naro as a second language. He suggests that the Deti have a population of 'few' and notes that the status of their language is 'critically endangered' or 'extinct'. I certainly encountered people claiming this language in the 1970s, and Traill did too, earlier in that decade. Brenzinger does not record the *ethnic group* known as Hai//om or ǂĀkhoe, since he includes them under the heading 'Khoekhoe-gowab', the term that designates the *language* they speak. *Gowab* simply means 'language'. There are about 200,000 Khoekhoe (formerly known by the derogatory term 'Hottentots'), and of these perhaps as many as 16,000 are Hai//om hunter-gatherers or former hunter-gatherers (see also Widlok 1999: 15–41).

The click-using Hadza and Sandawe of eastern Africa, respectively of Kenya and Tanzania, are often said to be related to the Khoisan peoples of southern Africa. The Hadza language seems to be an isolate and is spoken by fewer than 1,000. Sandawe appears to be very distantly related to the Khoe languages of Central Bushman groups, as well as to Khoekhoe cattle, sheep and goat herders of southern Africa (see Sands 1998). The Sandawe

Table 1.1 *Approximate populations of Bushman groups today*

	Speakers	Total population	Time period
Southern Bushmen			
/Xam	0	0	1920s
N//u	0	600	1930s
//Kx'au	0	0	1930s
//Ku //'e	0	0	1930s
!Gã !ne	0	0	1930s
//Xegwi	0	0	1988
ŋ/u	10–20	500	
! Xoõ	6,000	6,000	
Central Bushmen			
Naro, Ts'ao	9,000	9,000	
G/wi	2,300	2,300	
G//ana	1,500	1,500	
Khwe	6,000	7,000	
//Ani	1,100	1,300	
/Xaise	600	800	
G!oro	1,200	1,200	
Deti	Few	Few	
Shua	1,700	1,700	
Ts'ixa	400	400	
Danisa or Tshara	670	670	
Kua	2,500	3,000	
Tshoa	380	380	
Northern Bushmen			
!Xũ or !Xun and Ju/'hoan	10,000	10,000	
Unclassified isolates			
ǂHoã	200	?	
Kwadi	0	0	1960s
Hadza	800	800	

Source: Adapted from Brenzinger (2007: 188–90)

today have an agricultural subsistence base, but in the past were 'pure' hunter-gatherers. Estimates of their numbers vary between 20,000 and 70,000 (Brenzinger 2007: 189). I have not included the Sandawe in the table as they are not in any sense thought of today as 'Bushmen'.

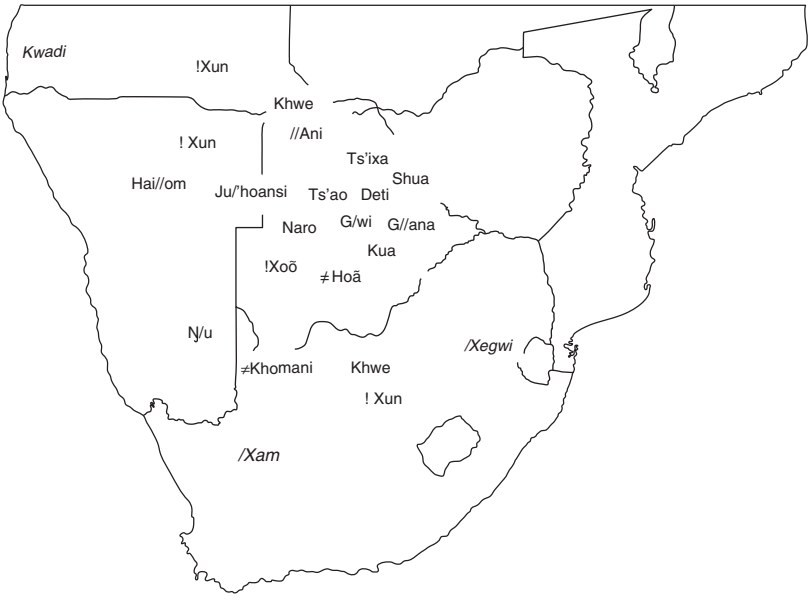

Figure 1.1 Locations of prominent Bushman groups
Source: Barnard (1992a)

Until the dawn of the Neolithic, all the world's peoples were hunter-gatherers. Tiny groups of hunter-gatherers remained in central and eastern Africa until fairly recently: that is, Bushmen or San are the last remnants of this once-widespread way of life. One often sees references in earlier literature to people such as the 'Dorobo'. This term today is a derogatory one for people without cattle, and much the same is often true for 'Bushmen' as well. Other eastern African languages were spoken until the last century or two by a great number of groups who have since then lived at least mainly by hunting and gathering: these means of subsistence were in the past more widespread than we find today. Brenzinger (2007: 192–5) includes here Aasáx, Yaaku, Elmolo, K'wadza, Dahalo, Akie, Okiek, Omotik and Nyang'i. Often linguistic change is accompanied by cultural change at the same time, and we see this in southern as well as eastern Africa. The way of life of earlier hunter-gatherers must have been quite different from that of recent ones. For this reason, some experts, such as Thomas Widlok (2016), have argued that we should be talking about hunter-gatherer 'situations' rather than hunter-gatherer 'societies'. There is no doubt that such 'situations' are on the decline, which is another reason to be careful about any such labels.

If Bushmen are not a single ethnic group, nor are they homogeneous. Studies of both male and female lines (for example, A. Knight *et al*. 2003; Pickrell *et al.* 2012) have suggested that southern African traditional hunter-gatherers are probably the most unlike and disparate peoples on earth. This includes biological difference (there are 'black' as well as 'yellow' or 'red' Bushmen), linguistic affiliation (some Bushmen speak Khoe or so-called Hottentot languages rather than San ones) and so on. Even what we call them reflects a kind of diversity. Many experts, especially in archaeology, call them San, a term that occurs in no Bushman or San language, whereas others prefer Bushmen or Basarwa, and a few have used Kua (for example, Valiente-Noailles 1988, 1993). Kua, Kúa or Kūa is the preferred generic term in a few languages, although Valiente-Noailles and a few others employ it specifically for the people of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve, especially the G//ana. Helga Vierich (1982) used Kūa in her PhD dissertation, and Valienate-Noailles (1994) used Kúa in his. Basarwa is very common throughout Botswana. Although they are used more in eastern Africa, the general terms Twa or Batwa and Baroa are also heard in some parts of southern Africa. Etymologically though, each of these terms is problematic. That is why it is so difficult to find an appropriate label for them.

My own choice of the traditional word 'Bushmen' is used in this book mainly because it is so very well known. One academic who is himself a 'Bushman' has expressed a preference for 'Kua' (Kiema 2010: 67–77). Yet even his preference is still not without ambiguity. Kuela Kiema (2010: 67) is a native speaker of G/wi. He explains further:

> If I meet a Tswana or other Bantu I say I am a Kua or a Mosarwa, but if I meet a Naro or any other people of my people I refer to myself as a Dcuikhoe. When speaking Setswana, I call myself a Mosarwa, but when speaking English I use the term Bushman or San … . I do not care whether the terms San, Bushman and Basarwa are popular in academic fields or not. My aim is to fight against such stereotypes in the struggle to regain my identity. I am a Kua not a San.

Still, *kua* can simply mean serf, and in the Okavango this meaning occurs (see Kiema 2010: 68). It has been used to refer to some specific ethnic group, and Brenzinger seems to use it in that sense.

Basarwa implies a people who have nothing: 'no tribal territory, no livestock, no culture, no property, no rights, no language, no ethnic identity, no human dignity, even no chief' (Kiema 2010: 69). Of course Kiema exaggerates here, but his understanding is not beyond the feelings of many in Botswana in the 1970s or even now. In the 1970s, during Botswana's Remote Area Development Programme (RADP), it was common to call Bushmen 'RADs' or Remote Area Dwellers. The Tswana phrase was actually *matengnyanateng*, literally 'deep inside deep', presumably meaning *beyond*

civilization. The RADP was to imply a social welfare initiative, but among Bushmen it did (accidentally) imply a sort of new form of ethnicity. Calling Bushmen 'San' does not really help, and the latter term has conferred an academic and a social development legitimacy born more of ignorance than of understanding (Kiema 2010: 69–70). As Kiema (2010: 70) says later on, the term San, or in its masculine singular form, Sãã̃b (his spelling), 'refers to a man who picks up food from dustbins or the ground'. Roie Thomas (2016: 33–5), among others, comments on this dilemma: there exists no neutral term at all. That is why I do not often use the word San. It is very common, but using it simply does not help.

Establishing how many Bushmen there are has always been difficult. As Widlok (1999: 19) points out, 'counting Bushmen' is more problematic with some groups than with others, even with a census designed to exclude from consideration either ethnic identity or language. Even indicating 'language spoken' on a post-apartheid census form in modern Namibia is problematic. In his words, 'there are, for instance, Hai//om (by self identification) who tend to speak Owambo. Implicitly it buys into the apartheid claim that ethnic identity is a "given" category that requires no further deconstruction.' There does not seem to be any way to win in this game, and a Hai//om who is clearly not Ovambo (or Owambo, Ambo) but Bushman in appearance either *has* rights to the use of communal land designated for Bushmen or *does not have* this right. Nor has that problem been alleviated by the removal of apartheid legislation. Hai//om Bushmen do not live in 'Bushmanland' and are, in effect, off the map even in modern Namibia. Ju/'hoansi (!Kung) have it a little better, since their traditional territories are mapped according to collective ownership, and their land area does more or less coincide with the boundaries of apartheid 'Bushmanland'. All that can be said in a positive way is that when we talk of Bushmen we tend to know whom we mean.

Once More, What about 'San'?

In the Preface I commented on the problematic nature of the word 'San'. Let me now make it clearer what that word might really mean. Here I quote extensively from Theophilus Hahn (1881: 3). He was the son of a missionary among the Nama, and he grew up with Khoekhoegowab (Nama) as virtually his native tongue.

> In the Nama language, one of the Khoikhoi idioms, the Bushmen are called Sā-n (com. plur) [*sic*]. The meaning of this term is not quite intelligible, and I frankly confess that, after nine years, of which I have spent nearly seven among the Khoikhoi, I did not succeed in arriving at a quite satisfactory etymology, and I must still adhere to the interpretation which I gave in the *Globus*, 1870, where I traced the word Sā-(b) to the

root SĀ, to inhabit, to be located, to dwell, to be settled, to be quiet. Sā(n) consequently would mean Aborigines or Settlers proper. These Sa-n or Sa-gu-a, Sonqua or Saunqua, &c. (obj. plur. msc.) as they are styled in the Cape Records, are often called Bushmen – the Bossiesman, Bosjesman, Bosmanneken of the Colonial Annals, a name given to them to indicate their abode and mode of living.

The word Sā(b) has also acquired a low meaning, and is not considered to be very complimentary. The Khoikhoi often speak of *!Uri-Sān* (white Bushmen) and mean the low white vagabonds and runaway sailors who visit their country as traders. One also hears, '*Khoikhoi tamab, Sab ke*', he is no Khoikhoi, he is a Sā, which means to say, '*he is no gentleman, he is of low extraction, or he is a rascal*'.

Of course, Hahn was writing in the late nineteenth century. It is true that the use of San and its variants (Soaqua, etc.) is slightly older than the use of Bushman (Bosjesmans, etc.) in either colonial Dutch or in English, though this does not matter that much. Archaeologist and historian M. L. Wilson (1986) notes that variants of *San* (Soaqua, Saoqua, Sanqua or Sonquas) first occurred in Jan van Riebeeck's journal on 9 January 1653. This was at the same time that the label *Quena* (Khoekhoe) first occurred. *Que* (meaning 'person') is the root, and *-na* or *-qua* is a plural indicator. Neither *Que* nor *San* caught on, however, at least not at that time, although variants of *San* were more common in the second half of the seventeenth century. It seems it was most commonly as a synonym for *Visman*, meaning fisherman or, more literally, fishman. The label 'Hottentots' (now always a derogatory term) was generally employed for both hunters and herders in the earliest days, and on 31 October 1685 we have the first occurrence of the word *Bosjesmans*. These were said to be a group of 'Hottentots' living along the Berg River, and they were also known as 'Somquaas' [*sic*]. In these times though, many writers did not see a difference between Bushmen and Khoekhoe, at least in part because the European category 'hunter-gatherer' simply did not exist.

The details of *why* it was the case that 'hunter-gatherers' did not exist as a category are explained more fully in my history of anthropological studies among Bushmen (Barnard 2007a: 11–21) and in other writings. Indeed, the idea of the 'hunter-gatherer' could not logically exist until European thought gave up the domination of *politics*, in favour of a turn to *economics* as the main driving force of social organization (Barnard 2004). Throughout southern African history, the terms 'Bushmen', 'Khoekhoe', 'Khoi' and 'San' have never been entirely stable in meaning (see Smith 1985). According to Wilson (1986), the term *Bosjesmans* seems to have become common by around 1770. In the early 1970s, as much as in 1881, 'Bushman' was in very common use and had long overtaken the undifferentiated 'hunter *or* herder' phrase or the use of the word 'Hottentot'.