

History of the Tankwa Karoo

The true meaning of the word "Tankwa" is said to be "place of no water" in /Xam, one of the languages of the San (bushmen).

Humans have lived in the Tankwa for at least 10 000 years - first the hunter/gatherer San (Bushmen) and then the Khoi pastoralists, who moved their livestock with the migration of the wild animals. In the 1700s, the Trekboer farmers started using the Tankwa to graze their dropper and merino sheep while moving from the summer heat of the Cederberg to the cooler temperatures on the Karoo escarpment. In the 1800s early European farmers arrived to farm small stock and plant wheat and watermelons, but the arid climate and poor soils meant that farming was not sustainable.

The San, the first people in South Africa

The earliest hunter-gatherers in southern Africa were the San or Bushmen people. The San populated South Africa long before the arrival of the Bantu-speaking nations, and thousands of years before the arrival of Europeans. The San believed that no individual owned the land and that everybody had the right to use it. Like many societies who depend on the land for survival, they regard it as sacred and respect it as a gift of God.

The San had no formal authority figure or chief, but governed themselves by group consensus. Disputes were resolved through lengthy discussions where all involved had a chance to make their thoughts heard until some agreement was reached. Certain individuals may have assumed leadership in specific spheres in which they excelled, such as hunting or healing rituals, but they could not achieve positions of general influence or power. San were largely egalitarian, sharing such things as meat and tobacco. Kinship bonds provided the basic framework for political models. Membership in a group was determined by residency.

The most important part of the San's lives was fire. The men were responsible for making fire and used two fire sticks that they carried with them at all times. Fire provided safety, warmth, light and a way to cook food.

San languages with their implosive 'clicks', belonged to a totally independent language family. /Xam speakers originally occupied a large part of western and northern South Africa, but by 1850, only a few hundred /Xam speakers survived in remote parts of the Tankwa Karoo and the Northern Cape. Today, the language /Xam no longer exists, but is documented in the LloydBleekCollection at the UCT archives, taken down word-for-word from some of the last /Xam speakers in the 1860s and 1870s by Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek. These pages record not just the /Xam language, but also their myths, beliefs and rituals. <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/>

The Khoi

About 2 000 years ago life for the San began to change significantly in the

Western part of Southern Africa. Pastoralists, also known as the Khoi, arrived, bringing with them their cattle and a different way of life. For the San hunter-gatherers many aspects of the Khoi way of life were strange and difficult to understand.

The spread of the Khoi pastoralists into the Cape resulted in a conflict of interests with the San hunter-gatherers of the area. A major source of conflict was competition for game. But while the Khoi started competing with the San for game, their sheep and cattle were creating a further problem by denuding the pastures on which the game was dependent. As the San watched the vast herds of game disappear, they felt justified in killing or stealing the animals that had taken the place of the game as the concept of ownership was foreign to them.

The Trekboere

The Trekboere were nomadic pastoralists of European settler and of Khoi descent living on the frontiers of the Dutch Cape Colony. The Trekboere began migrating into the interior Great Karoo and Tankwa Karoo with their hardy local stock of cattle during the late 17th century and throughout the 18th century to escape the autocratic rule of the Dutch East India Company. They were living in their wagons and rarely remained in one location for an extended period of time and traded both with white settlers and indigenous people. They were, like the Khoi, in constant conflict with the San.

Genocide

The result seems to have been a classic pattern of cultural displacement – aggressive pastoralists (Bantus, Khoi, Trekboere, white settlers) encounter peaceful hunter-gatherers (the San, who like many hunter-gatherer societies, had no warrior tradition at all), and clear them from the land as they would the game, killing the men, taking the women as concubines and gradually assimilating the indigenous culture into their own. Many historians describe the brutal killing of the San people (which was sanctioned by British colonial rule) by Bantus, Khoi, Trekboere and white settlers in the 18th and 19th century as a genocide.