THE SAN HUNTER-GATHERER SOCIETY

Historical evidence, for example rock paintings, show that the San people lived in the Kalahari, a vast desert that stretches over South Africa, Botswana and Namibia, from about 25,000 BC. The San are believed to be the original human inhabitants of Southern Africa and are the oldest culture in the world.

The San people survived in small numbers in the Kalahari Desert, as well as settling along the coast. Historical evidence found in coastal caves indicates that the San people were accomplished fishermen.
The San people are often referred to as ‘Bushmen’ but this is sometimes viewed as an offensive term and is therefore not used. They are physically quite small and have a unique “click” language. They used various skills to survive in the harshest of conditions.

Nomads

The San were hunter-gatherers and lived off the land by mainly hunting for wild game and gathering plants. Hunter-gatherers are ‘nomads’ (people who do not live permanently in an area). The San people moved depending on the migration patterns of the animals that they hunted as well as in search of water.

The San went on the move in search of food, if weather conditions changed and would leave a place if someone has died or if there had been a serious misfortune there. The San would not return to the place until the grave or event had been forgotten by all.

Hunting

The San lived in the ‘Stone Age’ period which meant they did not use metal, but their weapons and tools were made of wood, stones and bones.
The San invented their own type of bow and arrow, which was very effective for hunting antelope and buffalo. They used handbows with arrows dipped in poison. The poison was made from snake venom, plants and beetle larvae. They would dip their spears into this poison.

Before going to hunt, the San would conduct a religious ceremony to prepare themselves. This has been recorded in their rock art.

The San were excellent trackers and hunters and could follow the ‘spoor’ (tracks) of an animal across any type of terrain. They could identify the spoor of a wounded animal and track it down. They understood the habits of wild animals. They also set traps for animals, near places where animals come to drink water, for example.

The poison would take a while to sedate the animal, which meant that the San would often have to track the injured animal for days. They would offer thanks to the animal’s spirit after it was killed.

**Food**

The San ate the animals that they hunted and the fruit and seeds that they gathered. They also ate insects, such as beetles, caterpillars, moths, butterflies and termites. Wild honey was a favourite delicacy.

**Housing**

Due to the San’s nomadic lifestyle, they did not build permanent settlements. Instead, they stayed in rock shelters and/or open camps near waterholes. The shelters were made from materials that they found around them, for example thin branches, grasses and rocks. The women were in charge of building the shelters. A shelter could be erected in less than an hour. Huts were usually built in a circular arrangement around a central fireplace.
Due to their nomadic lifestyle, the San did not keep domesticated animals, nor did they farm crops. They did not make pottery, but instead used ostrich egg-shells for storing and holding liquids. These ostrich egg-shells were placed underground to keep the liquids cool.

![Ostrich Eggs](image1.jpg)

**Social Order**

The San lived in small family groups of roughly between 12 – 30 people. Men and women had different jobs. Men were responsible for hunting, fishing and making fire. Fire was pivotal in the lives of the San, as it provided them with warmth, light and to cook food.

Women did most of the gathering of plant foodstuffs. This would include fruits, berries, leaves, stems, bulbs and corms and plant roots. Sometimes women were also involved in hunting.

The San believed that all things were meant to be shared equally in a tribe. They demonstrated respect for each other and the land that they lived off, for example, they would only kill what they could eat. They had a vast knowledge of plants and animals. They would give each other regular gifts, rather than trade or barter.

Water was an essential resource for the San people. In times of drought, they would make “sipwells” by making a deep hole in damp sand. A long hollow grass stem was then inserted and the water sucked up and collected in an ostrich shell.

![Water was Collected in Ostrich Shells](image2.jpg)
Plant Medicine

Women would collect different herbs and bulbs for use in the preparation of medicine. Often San men would chew on ‘Hoodia Gordonii’ on long hunting trips. This bitter plant would suppress their appetite for 24 hours, so they were not hungry. Recently, this plant has been used in modern day medicine to help cure obesity.

Marriage and Children

The San men and women married very young, the women usually at the age of 7-9 years and boys at about 14 years old. The majority of the marriages were ‘monogamous’ (one partner) however the San do practise ‘polygamy’ (more than one partner).

In most tribes, hunting was regarded as extremely important in finding a wife. A hunter would hunt a large animal and the best pieces of the meat would go the daughter’s parents. If the parents accepted the meat, then the hunter was allowed to marry their daughter. Sometimes San marriages were arranged by parents.

Clothing

Most San wore very little clothing. Men usually wore a small piece of animal skin between their legs, which was tied in the front, around their loins. The women wore a small piece of skin in the front, decorated with beads. They seldom wore anything covering their shoulders, except in cold weather.
Both men and women wore ornaments such as necklaces, bracelets, earrings and hair ornaments. Necklaces were made from small berries, beads, ostrich shells, bones, teeth and animal claws.

Religion

The San believed in ‘Kaggen’, the creator of many things. Kaggen translates to ‘mantis’ which is why the San respected the Preying Mantis.
Example of a San Folklore

The Sun, Moon and the Stars

A young woman waited for the hunters to return every night. When it grew dark she threw white ash into the night sky. This became the Milky Way and guided the hunters’ home.

The moon is believed to be the old shoe of ‘Mantis’. Mantis placed it in the night sky to guide him. The sun was very jealous of the moon and started to cut off pieces of the moon, bit by bit. The moon begged the sun to stop and go away. Soon after, the moon started growing and the whole process started again.

Source: www.kalahari-meerkats.com

The San people believed in one powerful God, although they also believed in other, minor Gods. Offerings were made to the dead ancestors. Some groups also worshipped the moon.

They believed that after death, the soul went to God’s house in the sky.

Music and Dance

The San made musical instruments and were skilful musicians. Dancing rituals, such as a healing or rain dance were done.

These dances are often shown in the rock art. The San often went into trances during these dances.

Rock Art

Rock art is a term used to describe paintings or engravings on rocks or in caves. There is evidence of thousands of rock paintings all over southern Africa. The majority of this rock art was done by the San people. South African rock art was only discovered about 350 years ago and is found in rocky areas of KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern and Western Cape.

Rock paintings are found in caves and rock shelters, whereas rock engravings occur in rocky outcrops, riverbeds or on flat rocks in the veld. In rock engravings, animals are more common than human figures. The Eland (an antelope species) is often seen in rock art.
History: Grade 5

Hunter-Gatherers and Herders in Southern Africa

The San Hunter-Gatherers

The San rock art depicts the religious beliefs and practices of the time. The rock paintings provide us with insight into the lives of the San people.

The San would draw the art in a trance-like state. This trance-like state was brought about through medicine, dancing and drumming. It was a way in which the artist could connect with their ancestors and the spiritual world.

The San used brushes made from animal hair or bird feathers for painting. For engraving, the San used hard, sharp objects, for example spears or sharp stones. The San would paint with red, brown and yellow pigments. White was made from white clay or bird droppings, black from manganese minerals and charcoal. Blue and green were never used. The blood of an Eland was often mixed with the pigments.

Rock art often depicts human figures with long sticks and animals galloping or leaping.

The San People Today

The San people are a peaceful and friendly people who have lived in harmony with nature for at least 20 000 years.

The San had their lands invaded by cattle herding tribes (the Khoikhoi) from around 1 500 years ago, as well as by many colonists (white people) who tried to take over their land. The conflict between the Khoikhoi and the San led to the San leaving certain areas to continue their way of life in mountainous and desert areas. Some even joined the Khoikhoi tribes.
Today the San are found in the North-western Cape, the Kalahari, Namibia and Botswana. They are less nomadic than their ancestors. Many San have changed their old ways of life and have adopted a more modern way of living, as they were unable to continue as hunter-gatherers, because they could not roam freely.

The total population of the San people is estimated at 95 000 today, of which only 3000 follow their traditional ways of hunter-gathering.

In South Africa, most of the San people have had their land rights recognised, but San tribes in other places have not.

The term ‘Khoisan’ refers to both the San and Khoikhoi people. The picture of Khoisan people appears these days on the South African Coat of Arms.

The logo on the Coat of Arms means ‘diverse people unite’ and the Khoisan people in the logo represents channelling power to benefit all people in South Africa.
The figures in the Coat of Arms come from the *Linton Panel*, a famous piece of rock art which is now found in the South African Museum in Cape Town. It is one of the best preserved pieces of rock art.

The painting shows people capturing a power which the San used to heal the sick and to benefit the community.