

## San

The San people group is variously called "Bushmen," the *Khoi*, the *Khoisan*, the *Kung*, and (in Botswana) the *Basarwa* or *Remote Area Dwellers*. The term *San* is used by anthropologists presently. For some the term "Bushmen" has racist and sexist connotations. This people group may have been the first to occupy Africa thousands of years ago.

### Location

Presently, the majority of *San* still live in areas comprising the Kalahari Desert, which extends from northern South Africa into Botswana and Namibia. The Kalahari Desert varies in temperature from freezing to 115 degrees, depending on the season. It is 1200 miles long with an average altitude of 3000 feet. Its rainfall is limited to 6-10 inches a year.

### Culture

*Language:* Ten identifiable languages make up the Khoi-San language family. This unique family features up to five basic click sounds, uttered with many different articulations in combination with a complex array of surrounding sounds. The languages are also tonal. Some of them have all but vanished as children learn national languages. But some, such as Ju\hoan (5000 speakers), Naro (5000) and !xoo (4000), are still being taught to children and used at home and in the community.

*Daily Life:* The pure hunting-gathering lifestyle of the San has virtually disappeared, as even the most isolated of their areas are opened up with roads and development. National governments attempt to curb free hunting of wildlife and encourage the San to adopt a more traditional African rural lifestyle of farming and cattle rearing. However, hunting is an important part of their culture, and it is difficult to leave behind. Many retain their desert survival skills and their knowledge of hunting and gathering, which is utilized both legally and illegally.

The Botswana government in particular attempts to provide help through general development: schools, clinics, and infrastructure improvements. In addition, many programs are offered to get people started with planting and animal husbandry. Most San welcome this development and the opportunities to enter the mainstream of modern African life, but the transition is hard.

The people keep goats and cattle, produce and sell traditional crafts. They enthusiastically participate as citizens in national and local elections. They use the medical clinics, send their children to school, apply for plots from the government on which to farm and build homes, and look for employment in the towns. But they often lack the knowledge of how to make the most of opportunities, especially in the face of a great deal of prejudice. They often lack the self-discipline required for advancement. Alcoholism is a severe problem. Many live in abject poverty, reliant upon the government for food, living in grass dwellings, and unable to seek advancement.

*Clothing:* Transition now characterizes the San. All but a very few live in permanent villages or settlements. Small children continue to wear the traditional beaded or leather loin coverings, and the women adorn themselves with jewelry made from ostrich eggshell beads. But at three or four years, children dress in western clothing like their parents.

*Social Interaction:* The San are a mild-mannered and tolerant people, avoiding confrontation if possible. They make few demands on others and a *laissez faire* attitude toward child-rearing is the norm. Wrongdoing is defined and controlled by public opinion, and they avoid corporal punishment. Leadership among the San is reserved for those who have lived within that group for a considerable time, who have achieved a respectable age, and who have desirable personal qualities. People are generally frank and open and speak the truth. They are openly affectionate with their children and highly egalitarian, with gender-oriented tasks not so clearly delineated as in other ethnic groups.

Children are named after their paternal grandparents and parental siblings. People with the same names are generally related to each other, although they may not know exactly how.

*Marriage:* The San are slow to adopt "legal" marriage as defined by law because of lack of understanding and because they have their own customs. These differ from group to group, but they involve practical gifts and acts of service from the prospective groom to the girl and her parents, and of course, a public agreement between the elders of the families involved. The San are known by other ethnic groups for their faithfulness in marriage, though the lifestyle which puts individuals at risk of AIDS is becoming an active option for more and more people with disastrous effects. AIDS is making deadly inroads even in the desert.

*Religion and Superstition:* Like all people of animistic background, the San believe there is a powerful creator god but that he remains virtually inaccessible to human beings who have offended him. Among their neighbors, the fear of unseen spirits and the destructive jealousy of fellow human beings seem to be major components when they consider and interact with the spiritual realm. Fear seems to dominate San belief less, though people are terrified of death. In all the San groups, there is an important ritual dance that transforms spiritual power and energy into medicine. That power is concentrated in the stomach and can be used for healing.

*Art:* The San are the source of many of the oldest rock paintings found in Africa.

### History

In the past, the San roamed the vast continent of Africa for thousands of years. As people from West Africa moved east and south, and as farmers from South Africa moved north for more land, the San, who did not wish to be subjugated, withdrew. Those that did not became the objects of repression and extermination. As many as 200,000 San were slaughtered during colonial times.

Over thousands of years, the San became adept at living off the land under extremely harsh conditions where farming was not possible. But they also interacted with both Bantu Africans and European settlers, trading with them, and serving as game trackers and cattle herders. This servitude was, at times, not much different from slavery.

### SIM Involvement

In Botswana, SIM partners with the Africa Evangelical Church (AEC) to share the saving message of Jesus and to train church leaders. The !xoo San have had little or no evangelistic outreach in their own language.



SIM has two families working among this group. They live in tents and small prefab rooms respectively. They are currently learning this unwritten language and carrying out linguistic analysis to determine whether a translation of the Bible is advisable for their church planting ministry. In light of the growing influence of outside languages among the San, it may not be necessary. The two families have also begun Bible studies and help with religious education in the villages.

### Scripture Availability

The entire Bible was translated into Southern Ju\`hoan by Dutch Reformed Church missionaries in the mid 1990s. A second Dutch Reformed Church couple is currently finishing a translation of the Bible in Naro, in D'Kar in Botswana. A South African linguist has produced a phonology and dictionary, but the language remains unwritten, with no established orthography (the part of language study that deals with spelling and letters).

### Urgent Prayer Need

Bingham Academy in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, urgently needs a [French teacher](#) to join their staff team in August. Pray that God will provide the right person to meet this need.