

# *A glimpse into Bushman presence in the Anglo-Boer War*

## **Introduction**

When the first European settlers arrived in southern Africa they found the land already inhabited by indigenous societies. Some of these groups, such as the Khoi pastoralists and Bantu-speaking agriculturists, were relative newcomers as they most probably only entered the sub-region around 2000 years ago (Hall 1987:17–31). By way of contrast, the Bushman hunter-gatherers whom all settler societies encountered when they entered southern Africa had been there for almost 25 000 years. Relationships between these hunter-gatherers and other indigenous groups were not always amicable but in many instances they did manage to live alongside each other relatively peaceably. These situations almost always led to the Bushmen being reduced to the lowest class in these new socio-economic systems of which they eventually became part.

The knell for hunter-gatherers, however, was sounded by the settlement of the sub-continent by European colonists. Conflict between European settlers and Bushman hunter-gatherers over land and resources led to the inevitable genocide of these ‘first peoples’. In some areas, such as in the Sneeuberge of the Upper Karoo, conflict was especially intense. Here the Hundred Years Bushman War temporarily halted colonial frontier expansion and saw the slaughter of virtually thousands of Bushmen (Newton-King 1992). Less bloody, but perhaps as intense, the history of contact between European settlers and the last Bushman hunter-gatherers in KwaZulu-Natal followed a similar path. Livestock raiding by Bushmen on European-owned farms began soon after the Great Trek in 1838 and continued for about another 50 years (Wright 1971). These raids were conducted by the Berg Bushmen (also known as Bathwa or Seroa by Nguni and Sotho-speaking groups respectively) who operated from the Drakensberg (Ukhahlamba) and Maluti mountains.

With their former hunting territories hemmed in by migrating Sotho farmers from the west and an expanding colonial frontier from the east, they increasingly came to rely on livestock raiding as a means of maintaining their inherently fragile and now highly threatened economy. However, with the imposition of African buffer locations along the base of the Drakensberg by Sir Theophilus Shepstone, then Native Commissioner of Natal, these raids soon became something of the past. Those bands

who were not wiped out by means of retaliation by the colonial government either migrated elsewhere or were eventually absorbed into the farming communities of their Sotho- and Nguni-speaking neighbours (Wright 1977: 184–195). Within this mountainous panorama the Bushmen's final scene was to be acted out. By the end of the nineteenth century independent Bushman hunter-gatherers all but disappeared from the South African landscape.

This climactic event saw surviving Bushmen being either acculturated or having intermarried with other groups and no longer regarded as authentic. The popular notion that real Bushmen were either extinct, of the last generation, or could only still be found somewhere in the Kalahari desert pervaded historical writings. Hence the possible contribution of Bushmen populations to modern South African history has been largely ignored. Whereas the southern Bushmen figure prominently in the pages of South African history books before 1890, their contribution fades away soon after the European colonisation of the sub-continent. Surprisingly, similar sentiments have also been voiced in historical writings regarding 'first-peoples' in other parts of the world which have been dominated by settler societies (i.e. America, Australia, New Zealand). Again through these writings, readers are led to believe that these peoples' contribution to modern history is insignificant. Perhaps this is due to their assumed extinction (Prins 1999).

These scholarly notions, perhaps more than any one historical event, have led to the final deathblow for many 'first peoples' as distinct entities. The fact that the southern Bushmen have been treated as peripheral to modern mainstream South African history is clearly evident in their apparent absence during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902, only 30 years after the well-recorded period of Bushman livestock raiding (Wright 1971:194) came to an end. This is rather ironic as it has become fashionable among liberal historians to pay more attention to the role of indigenous populations during this war (Changuion 1999:101–109). In fact, the renaming of the Anglo-Boer War to the more politically correct South African War is a direct attempt to acknowledge and incorporate the contribution of the African population to this war, and to recognise that it was not only a 'white man's war'.

We know that indigenous groups and the acculturated descendants of South Africa's first peoples were affected by this war in many different ways. It is almost certain, for instance, that many *agterryers* (mounted attendants or servants) employed by the Boers would have been of Bushman descent. Oral accounts by old farmers suggest that individuals of Bushman descent were frequently used by British forces to spy on Boer commando movements in the Eastern Cape (Bellcross pers.comm.). However, it also happened that Bushman farm labourers in the same area accompanied Afrikaner rebels on commando (Schmidt pers.comm.).

Most information on the role of Bushman individuals during the Anglo-Boer War is forthcoming from a small community of Bushman farm labourers in the southern Transvaal highveld. Interestingly, some members of this community originated in Lesotho and the Natal Drakensberg where they had been implicated in livestock raids on white farmers some thirty years earlier. For them participation in the Boer War on the side of the Afrikaner farmers was a logical gesture which would have secured their economic and ethnic survival. In order to understand their motive for taking part in the Anglo-Boer War it is first necessary to outline the events leading up to this

decision. A large percentage of the information reported here is based on oral interviews with European farmers and Bushman farm labourers in the Lake Chrissie area. Given the problematical nature of assessing oral tradition, the evidence reported here must be treated with circumspection.

### **The last trek of the Drakensberg Bushmen**

In the early 1880s a Lutheran pastor P. Filter, who was attached to the German mission station at Lüneburg in northern KwaZulu-Natal (Laband 1990:185), came across two groups of migrating Bushmen at Annysspruit near Piet Retief. Filter was involved in transport riding between the eastern Transvaal and Natal (Filter 1925:186). According to his great-grandson Jorg Filter, he most probably provided the gold diggers at Barberton with freshly cut wooden beams which he obtained from the indigenous forests on the mountains surrounding Lüneburg at the time (Filter pers.comm.). He befriended these Bushmen whom he met on several occasions over a four-year period. They were migrating from the central Natal Drakensberg to the southern Transvaal highveld. Oral tradition among white farmers in Piet Retief has it that pastor Filter helped these migrating Bushmen and provided them with transport on his oxwagon (Weber pers.comm. 1998). The Bushmen, whose leaders were known as Kibit and Adons, told pastor Filter that they had operated as livestock raiders in the Weenen area but that they left Natal during the Anglo-Zulu War (1879) after being pursued by angry Boers. One group was generally taller and darker in complexion whilst members of the second group appeared smaller and yellower in complexion. According to the memoirs of pastor Filter the black Bushmen originated in the foothills of the Natal Drakensberg while the yellow Bushmen originally came from Lesotho (Filter 1925:187). In fact, some of these yellow Bushmen spoke Sesotho which suggests a long period of residence amongst or adjacent to Sotho speakers. Interestingly, it is generally assumed that Bushman livestock raids on European farms in Natal ceased soon after 1872 (Wright 1971:194). However, the Natal colonial authorities did receive reports of cattle drives along the Drakensberg in the vicinity of Giants Castle in 1879 (Thompson 1990:265–266). It can be speculated that these drives may have been conducted by Sotho in collaboration with Bushman groups but the evidence is too uncertain to be sure.

The year 1879, when these Bushmen left the foothills of the Drakensberg, is important on two accounts. Not only did it see the outbreak of the Anglo-Zulu War but also the defeat of chief Moorosi, the long-time ally and protector of the Berg Bushmen. These occurrences provide an important backdrop to understanding the possible political context of this migration. In fact, it is generally accepted that the last stand of the Berg Bushmen took place in 1879 when they aided chief Moorosi of the Baphuti in his final battle against colonial forces. For many years Moorosi, a semi-independent Sotho chief, orchestrated livestock raids on European farmers in the Eastern Cape Colony and Natal. Many of these raids were conducted in collaboration with his Bushman allies. Ties between the Baphuti and the Bushmen were particularly close. Many of them were affines, and it is even said that Moorosi himself was partially of Bushman descent. In April 1879 colonial forces besieged Moorosi's stronghold, a well-fortified mountain in south-eastern Lesotho, only managing to conquer it eight months later. The Bushmen, who were armed with bows

and arrows, fought alongside the Baphuti but eventually also succumbed (Jolly 1996:60).

These developments were closely monitored by the Zulu King Cetshwayo. At this time he was also entering a period of military resistance against British and colonial authorities. In March 1879, two months after Moorosi led the Baphuti into rebellion against the Cape authorities, he received messengers from Cetshwayo who had promised assistance. On the 18th of the same month a report in *The Natal Witness* stated that Moorosi and his men might be trying to make their way to Zululand by way of the Drakensberg (Thompson 1990:266). It is not certain if any of them did manage to escape to Zululand. However, it is entirely possible that the Bushmen whom Filter met were somehow connected to chief Moorosi and caught up in the turmoil at the time. It seems that they were granted safe passage through Zululand by Cetshwayo. Since at least 1847 small communities of acculturated Bushmen had also been living together with Zulu and Swazi residents near the sources of the Pongola river under chief Nyamainja as subjects of the Zulu king Mpande (Orpen 1964:311–329). It is entirely possible that these Bushmen had connections with those of the Drakensberg and their presence in the peripheral Pongola region may have been enough incentive for other groups to join them. In fact, at various stages in his life chief Nyamainja moved with his followers to Swaziland, Natal and Lesotho, clearly indicating that he and his Bushmen subjects may have had a wide network of contacts (Orpen 1964:311–324; Eldredge 1994:120). A contributing factor concerns Boer farmers who in northern Natal and southern Mpumalanga aided the Zulu against the colonial and British forces during the Anglo-Zulu War (Laband 1990:204). Clearly, fleeing Bushmen would have regarded these Boers as more sympathetic to their cause.

The Bushmen whom pastor Filter encountered stayed for a while in the area bordering the disputed Pongola River territory but eventually settled at Lake Chrissie further north (Filter 1925:188–189). And indeed it appears that Lake Chrissie became the last haven for various groups of south-eastern Bushmen. These would have included remnants of the original Transvaal Lowveld Bushmen, such as those which inhabited the Honingklip shelter (Korsman & Plug 1992), and more recent arrivals from the Orange Free State (Potgieter 1955:5) and the Natal Drakensberg/Lesotho respectively. In addition, the Lake Chrissie Bushmen also had contact with other groups in Mozambique (Filter 1925:190). Exact figures are hard to come by but it is said that one farm, Goedehoop, had at least 100 Bushman occupants when the first Europeans arrived in the area (Potgieter 1955:8). The migrating Bushmen whom pastor Filter encountered could not have numbered more than 100 and indeed on one occasion he only saw about 40 individuals hiding in a cave (Filter 1925:188). Nevertheless, oral tradition suggests that there may have been several hundred of them in the Lake Chrissie area when the first Europeans entered the region.

### **From servants to allies**

Towards the middle of the 19th century the Swazi started controlling the southern Transvaal highveld including Lake Chrissie. However, through the colonial system of concessions the area became part of the so-called New Scotland in 1867. This initiative was the brainchild of the Scot Alexander McCorkindale and was supposed

to benefit the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek economically. Not only were farms in this area occupied by Scottish emigrants but he also planned a port at the mouth of the Usuthu River. However, on his sudden death from fever in 1871 the whole scheme collapsed. Thereafter large portions of New Scotland were again settled by Boer farmers who wanted to secure the area for themselves (Bonner 1983:117–120). However, they were not the only claimants to these lands.



Klaas Machoqwane, the great-grandson of the Bushman leader Kibit who left the Drakensberg in 1879. Today all the Bushmen at Lake Chrissie have become farm labourers and have adopted a western style of housing and material culture.

(*Photograph: F.E. Prins.*)

Some African groups in New Scotland, such as the amaNgqamane, still paid tribute to the Swazi royalty and hence regarded the area as rightfully belonging to Swaziland. Since the 1840s Swazi impis regularly traversed this area in search of booty. This included the children of neighbouring tribes, including Bushmen, who were abducted to become serfs. Many of these children were again sold to Boer farmers who needed cheap labour to develop their farms (Bonner 1983). Others were taken to Swaziland where they became known as the *tifunjwa* (i.e. non-Swazi captives from outside the boundaries of the Swazi kingdom). Such captives formed an important part of the Swazi economy and were in fact assimilated into Swazi society. By a complex process their presence was used to justify Swazi rights to cede those areas where they originated (Bonner 1983:80). In fact, through this system many Bushmen came to be regarded as Swazi subjects. The Bushmen residents of the southern highveld were particularly hard hit by Swazi raids, and the Swazi looked upon them with contempt.

It is also possible that the Swazi royalty was angered by the relative protection which the Bushmen enjoyed under Zulu hegemony in the Pongola region — an area claimed by both Swazi and Zulu. For instance, in 1858 King Mswati of Swaziland attacked chief Nyamainja, who also had Bushmen living under him, in an attempt to reassert control over this trans-Pongola region (Bonner 1983:93). According to oral tradition literally hundreds of Bushmen were murdered by Swazi impis during these

raids on the southern highveld. Certain features of the landscape, such as an interesting mushroom rock formation at Breyten also known as Moordrots (Murder Rock) stand as silent witnesses marking the sites where particular atrocities took place (Schoonraad & Schoonraad 1972:10). Tradition has it that Bushmen frequently hid from the Swazi raiders in the numerous pans of the Lake Chrissie area (Potgieter 1955:3–5). Yet even so Bushmen continued to be exterminated.

Paradoxically, a safeguard came in the form of the Boer farmers who offered to protect the remaining Bushmen from Swazi aggression in exchange for cheap wage labour. A singular incident as told to the author by two Bushmen, Simon Ngwenya and Klaas Machoqwane (the latter being a great-grandson of the Bushman leader Kibit), is particularly noteworthy. Soon after their arrival on the southern Transvaal highveld Kibit's band was besieged and trapped by a Swazi impi in a cave known locally among the Bushmen as Magageng. The Bushmen thought that they would all be killed the next day and prepared for the worst. However, early the next morning a Boer commando under the leadership of Bauer Bezuidenhout came to their aid and told the Swazi to leave the Bushmen alone. Although Bushman accounts paint this encounter as one of friendship between Boer and Bushman, the actual reason for the Boer action was probably more sinister. There is reason to believe that they wanted to secure the Bushmen children for themselves as serfs or *inboekelinge*. In fact, the abduction of Bushman children by Boer farmers in northern Natal and adjacent areas of Mpumalanga was something of an institution. J.M.Orpen, who acted as chief magistrate of Winburg and Harrismith areas in the 1850s, for instance, was told that Boer farmers in Utrecht regularly abducted Bushman children in the Pongolo area (Orpen 1964:311–324). Present-day farmers and Bushmen in the Lake Chrissie district still relate stories of how the Boers used to catch Bushmen with sugar and porridge as bait. Despite official outcries (Eldredge 1994:93–126) the abduction and 'employment' of Bushmen children as serfs was still very much a reality on the southern highveld in the 1880s — almost twenty years after it ceased in other parts of South Africa. The Bushmen whom pastor Filter encountered, for instance, at first enquired if he was going to remove their children (Filter 1925:186–187). Bushman descendants also told the present author that Matsebula, an old Bushman who died in the 1980s, could still remember how towards the end of the previous century he was taken from his parents to work on a farm (Ngwenya pers.comm.). Not all child-removing encounters between Boer and Bushman necessarily led to bloodshed, and there is evidence to suggest that the Boers sometimes compensated the Bushman parents for abducted children (Orpen 1964:322). This would have contrasted with the attitude of Swazi raiding parties who not only decimated whole bands of Bushmen but would also have beaten the abductees severely *en route* back to Swaziland (Forbes pers.comm.).

With the disappearance of large herds of game on the southern highveld by the end of the 19th century, remaining Bushman groups had few options left in order to ensure their economic survival. Their choice to become *inboekelinge* and farm labourers on European-owned farms rather than Swazi serfs was perhaps seen as the lesser of two evils. It is perhaps in this context that the oral tradition must be viewed. Bushmen descendants today emphatically maintain that the encounter at Magageng led to a long-lasting friendship between the Bushmen and the Boer farmers in this

area. Seventy years later Potgieter (1955:4) was told that the Bushmen of Lake Chrissie still regard the Europeans as their protectors against the threat which they saw in the Swazi, and the present author recorded similar sentiments in 1998.

Tradition has it that Kibit and his followers became wage labourers on the Boer farms soon after the incident at Magageng. The segregationist outlook of the Calvinistic farmers also allowed these Bushmen to retain a measure of ethnic identity in the face of rapid cultural change. With the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer War in 1899 the transformation of the once nomadic Bushmen into semi-resident farm labourers was almost complete. Kibit, once the leader of a nomadic band of Bushmen who operated from the Natal Drakensberg, became the personal assistant and farm manager of Bauer Bezuidenhout. When Bezuidenhout left for commando duty during the Anglo-Boer War he was accompanied by a loyal Kibit who acted as his *agterryer*. Both Boers and their Bushman farm labourers were threatened by Swazi incursions, while British overtures to the Swazi royalty were viewed with suspicion.

### **Participation in the Anglo-Boer War**

The Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 was one of the best documented wars at the time, and was comprehensively reported on by numerous war correspondents and journalists. Boer and British soldiers kept diaries and many of the combatants wrote books on the war after the cessation of hostilities (Pakenham 1979). However, most of this documentation was by Europeans, and their reports reflect a bias towards white perceptions of the war. It is therefore not surprising that there is virtually no documentation on the role of Bushmen during the Anglo-Boer War. Again we have to rely on oral data to ascertain such information. Oral accounts suggest that most of the direct Bushman involvement took place during the guerrilla phase of the war when the southern Transvaal highveld became the battleground of *bittereinders* (diehards) and the scorched-earth policy of Lord Kitchener.

### **Support lent directly to Boer commandos**

Although the Bushman farm labourers of Lake Chrissie generally supported their masters during the Anglo-Boer War they were never armed for combat. Some accompanied the Boer commandos as *agterryers* to the battlefield. Especially members of the Ermelo and Carolina commandos apparently had Bushman *agterryers* as support. Their main function was to carry provisions, look after the horses during combat, act as sentries, and be all-round assistants to the Boer combatants.

During the battle of Lake Chrissie on 6 February 1901 Boer commandos under General Botha attacked the British forces who camped above the little town of Chrisiesmeer (Reid 1997:1). General Botha's main aim with this attack was to cripple the advance of General Smith-Dorrien into the eastern Transvaal. According to oral tradition Smith-Dorrien's march had been kept under observation by Bushman *agterryers* who also acted as messengers on this occasion. The Boers capitalised on the Bushmen's knowledge of the terrain. With their help the Boers could anticipate exactly where Smith-Dorrien would establish his camp. The next day the Boer commandos attacked and 75 British soldiers were killed or wounded against the Boer losses of about 80. However, the British lost 300 horses which were either stampeded or killed. Despite the losses on the Boer side, their eradication of the British horses

did delay the British advance into the Eastern Transvaal and gave the Boer commandos time to re-group (Reid 1997:3). However, it was not only as *agterryers* where the Bushmen's knowledge of the landscape aided the Boer commandos but also as active onlookers of the war.

A Dr J. P van der Westhuizen recently wrote a letter to *Die Burger* in which he recounted some experiences of the Anglo-Boer War (Van der Westhuizen 1999:2). According to him one of the farms at Lake Chrissie, known by the Scottish name of Lake Banagher, used to belong to a certain commandant Prinsloo. One of his loyal farm servants was a Bushman by the name of Job. One night the small Boer commando of which Prinsloo was a member hid in the thick reeds of Lake Banagher



Lake Banagher. A Boer commando trapped by British forces escaped from this area after a Bushman called Job, realising that his employer was among those trapped, showed them an escape route in the heavy mist. (Photograph: F.E. Prins.)

when pursued by a numerically superior force of British soldiers. In the mist of the night Job suddenly appeared amongst the Boers and told them that they had been totally surrounded by the British soldiers. He assured them, however, that he knew a secret way out of the lake and persuaded them to follow him through the mist, leading their horses by the bit. In this manner the Boer commando managed to escape without any casualties. J. P. van der Westhuizen met the aged Job in the 1960s and described him as a dignified old Bushman with an admirable personality (Van der Westhuizen 1999:2).

### **Domestic support**

Most Bushmen remained on the farms, where they aided Boer families throughout the war. With the implementation of the scorched-earth policy of Lord Kitchener in 1901 some Boer farmers sent their livestock to be hidden in Swaziland by their loyal Swazi

and Bushman servants. These herds were returned safely to the Boer farms after the cessation of hostilities. Other Bushmen remained on the Boer farms where they acted as general assistants and messengers, reporting to farmers' families on the movements of British forces. Most moving of all these occurrences are those of Bushmen caring for Boer women and children who were hiding in caves. Two such incidents are well remembered on the southern Transvaal highveld.

The first relates to the Van Zyl family of the farm Goedehoop. During the last year of the war Jakomiena Elizabeth Van Zyl and her children decided to hide from the British soldiers in a sandstone shelter next to an isolated pan known as Eiland Meer. Here they stayed for almost a year whilst the British soldiers travelled from farm to farm in search of Boer families to be taken as prisoners to the concentration camps. During her year of hiding Jakomiena relied on a loyal Bushman servant who not only reported to her on the activities of British soldiers in the vicinity but also provided her with food. Much of this was foraged from the veld and included blesbuck which he hunted on occasion. Eventually Jakomiena was caught by the British who took her to a concentration camp near Barberton. It is not known what happened to her Bushman servant at that stage, but his descendants live on the farm Lake Banagher to this day.

A similar set of circumstances prevailed on the farm Bankfontein near Breyten as recalled in a letter to *Die Burger* by Peet Steyn (Steyn 1999:6). Here the farmer's wife Tienie Steyn was aided by a Bushman named Cheese. Cheese had to act as sentry and general assistant to the Boer family. He would sit on a hill behind the farmhouse and report on British troop movements in the vicinity. By the time the British soldiers arrived on the farm Tienie Steyn and her daughters, Lettie and Nettie together with Cheese had departed on a horse-drawn spider, to hide in a nearby series of caves. These caves were locally known as the *wonderbanke* and their entrances were well camouflaged by indigenous bush. Most of the Steyns' valuable furniture and other belongings were hidden in them. From the caves they could also observe the activities of the British soldiers at the farmstead — they usually did not stay longer than a day and a half. During the war this family spent most of their time at the caves and apparently occupied their farmhouse only for about three months.

## **Conclusion**

The participation of Bushmen during the Anglo-Boer War is a little known aspect of this country's history. Not only did the European bias during the Anglo-Boer war ignore such contributions at the time, but the assumed extinction of the southern Bushmen soon after 1890 has also limited modern historical enquiries into this fascinating topic. The close comradeship between Boer and Bushman during the Anglo-Boer War can be understood in terms of the Boer practice of obtaining serfs (*inboekelinge*), and the economic and cultural transformations many Bushmen had to experience in order to survive in the new social order. The Anglo-Boer War was an important factor in strengthening the forced mutual allegiance of the Boer farmers and their Bushman servants. The segregationist outlook of Boer farmers and the manner in which they regarded the Swazi ensured the ethnic survival of a small group of Bushmen as farm labourers until modern times.

The eastern Transvaal never had a large 'coloured' population into which the Lake Chrissie Bushmen could have been assimilated and, unlike parts of the Eastern Cape Province, miscegenation between Boer and Bushman apparently never occurred. Despite some sentiment against the Swazi, many Bushmen intermarried and took on the cultural identity of their Swazi neighbours. Paradoxically, even those Bushmen who staunchly adhere to a Bushman ethnic identity have taken Swazi clan names, even though they do not necessarily owe allegiance to a Swazi chief. The recent colonial history of the Lake Chrissie Bushmen is in a sense a microcosm of the larger melting pot, the intermingling and clash of different cultures, which produced the modern South African mosaic. For the Bushmen of the southern Transvaal highveld this is aptly symbolised in the imposing Union Buildings in Pretoria. Tradition has it that this building, which stands for a unified South Africa, was built with sandstone blocks quarried from the *wonderbanke* — the same place where a Bushman aided a Boer family during the war that heralded the beginning of the modern era in South Africa.

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