





Forgotten people of this  
humiliated Bushmen

# Book of the phantom

appearance of the Drakensberg Bushmen?

The Drakensberg was one of the last havens for the southern Bushmen who, at one time, inhabited the entire sub-continent. But with the intrusion of Bantu-speaking groups and colonials, their hunting grounds diminished, forcing them to raid white farms for livestock. White farmers retaliated by sending out commandos, and those that did not flee were either killed or their children taken as serfs.

In an attempt to control a volatile situation, Sir Theophilus Shepstone placed Zulu-speaking refugees along the foothills of the Berg as a buffer against Bushmen raiders, forcing the Bushmen deeper into the Drakensberg range while the Sotho moved further into the eastern highlands of Basutoland. By about 1850, the situation became intolerable, and the few hundred Bushmen who remained were forced either to assimilate into certain Bantu-speaking communities, or to retaliate.

Perhaps the Bushmen's greatest ally was the BaPhuti chief Maroosi. Together with his Bushman subjects, he was an unrelenting raider of both white farms and black groups. British colonial forces finally decided to attack him.

For a long while he withstood the attack at Mt Maroosi in south-eastern Basutoland, but in 1879 he was defeated at his mountain stronghold, and along with him died many of his Bushman subjects. This was the final stand of the Drakensberg Bushmen for a way of life that had persisted for thousands of years on the sub-continent.

## The survivors?

Yet the question remains what happened to the survivors? Anthropologist Frans Prins of Natal Museum, Pietermaritzburg has been puzzled by the Berg Bushman's complete disappearance. He found it highly unlikely that they left no trace. So the mystery remained until his attention was drawn by amateur historian Bert Schroeder to an old historical German document which gives ample proof that two groups fled the area in 1879 - the period of Maroosi's defeat.

Who were they? One group, the "Tlountle"



**BOXED IN:** Little remains of the original San culture in the home of farm manager Simon Segubu. Square houses and television sets have replaced traditional dwellings and values.

Lesotho, the other group operated in the Weenen/Estcourt area. Over a period of five years their movements were recorded by Father Filter, a missionary belonging to the Hermannsburg Mission Station, who did some transport riding and travelled frequently to Mpumalanga. He helped the Bushmen on their migration, even giving them lifts on his wagon at times.

To quote Frans Prins, "They had their own little 'great' trek". They finally settled in the flat, pan-pocked grasslands of Lake Chrissie in the Mpumalanga highlands. In this way the last Bushmen of the Berg had finally been located, and the true identity of the Lake Chrissie Bushmen began to unfold.

## Bushmen of Lake Chrissie

In 1955 a study was conducted on the Lake Chrissie Bushmen by E F Potgieter. He believed that they would be extinct within the next two generations, as he saw almost no young children among them. In addition, the women preferred dashing Swazi husbands for prestige and better prospects of becoming wealthy. Mr Potgieter named his work *The Disappearing Bushmen of Lake Chrissie*.

It is now almost 40 years later. Few Bushmen descendants remain, although Frans Prins has located a number on farms in the area. Close to Lake Bannagher lives a small community who retain little, or nothing, of their Bushman heritage. It is astonishing just how petite they are. In fact, the women are even tinier than the Ituri pigmies of Central Africa, making them the smallest women of any race in the world. Swazi men regard them as gorgeous but inferior in status. To improve their social standing many Bushmen adopted Swazi clan names and try to pass as Swazi.

Today many are proud to be called Bushmen with a new awareness of their lost identity taking place. When Prins showed them a coffee table book of the Drakensberg paintings the immediate reaction was tremendous excitement, and Bokvel, a youngster, grabbed hold of the book and ran over to his Swazi neighbours shouting "Look at what our Bushmen have

## Alone with his dreams

The latest paintings in the Drakensberg are in a style known as "elands in boxes". Paintings of this same late style are to be found in a cave in the Lake Chrissie area. Here they are totally out of place in a region, where the style of Bushmen paintings is quite different from those in the Drakensberg. Bushmen lived in this cave, and even used it for the ritual supervision of initiate Swazi youths, just as they supervised Sotho youths in the 19th century Basutoland.

In this cave lives a Bushman recluse, very much like the one that wandered about the Drakensberg heights at the turn of the century. Almost nothing is known about him. Like his solitary forebear, he has no identity and apparently no real home. He lives in this cave for part of the year and then suddenly disappears for months. Shy and elusive, farmers only occasionally see him standing next to isolated farm roads eating berries and collecting wild plant foods.

## Where to now?

A solitary figure haunting the Drakensberg highlands, an enigmatic and itinerant loner stubbornly holding on to the ways of his forefathers, scattered descendants hankering after the old ways. The Drakensberg Bushmen are still extant - in spirit at least. But they have no land, few resources, and can barely raise their voices above the excited political hubbub of an emerging nation.

The Bushmen of Lake Chrissie, and others like them, are a people without an acknowledged identity. In the past there was no classification for Bushmen in South Africa, and many of them tried, often without any success, to be classified as coloured, as Zulu, Swazi, or whatever.

Others were simply never classified and remained without an official identity, not even a false one. Perhaps with a growing awareness of their presence they will be recognised as a unique and distinct group, as humans, as special - perhaps as the very last Bushmen of South Africa.