

NAEVII UKAAS: THE CEDARBERG SAN IN 1830

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In 1830, the first missionaries of the Rhenish Missionary Society were establishing their station at Wupperthal in the Cedarberg. European settlers had by this time been established in the Oliphants River valley for more than half a century,¹ and equally the Karoo to the east to the mountains had long been used at least as *trekveld*.² Nevertheless, the mountains, and indeed the dry plains to the north-east, were still inhabited by small groups of independent San, or Bushmen.³ It is thus not in the least surprising that the leader of the Rhenish missionary Society party, the Rev. Dr. Baron Theodore von Wurmb, wrote in his journal for 7 May as follows:

The *Bojesmannen* [sic] (Bushmen)⁴ have attacked a farm in our neighbourhood. Everything [Alles] on the farm was murdered, some of the stock driven off, the rest shot with their poisoned arrows. At the moment the Bushmen are carrying out the most terrible atrocities in the surroundings, as, because of the great drought in their country, they have nothing to eat. Alas, the local Europeans (farmers) are themselves the cause [*Schuld*, which also carries the connotation of guilt] of these atrocities, because they essentially treat these Bushmen as wild animals, and every local farmer boasts about who has shot dead many of these people. The farmers organise common hunting parties against the bushmen; and if Bushmen come to a farm and request food, they are given nothing, but rather all their goods are taken away and they are driven off with sticks or forced to perform the farmer's work. You should not be apprehensive that the Bushmen should do anything against us - towards us they behave with great friendliness, and when they come to us, we give them the food that we have; they show great love towards us and several of them desire to hear something about God.

1. P.L. Scholtz, 1964. 'Die Historiese Ontwikkeling van die Onder-Olifantsrivier, 1660-1902: 'n Geskiedenis van die Distrik Vanrhynsdorp', *Archives Yearbook for South African History*, II, 32-4.
2. P.J. Van der Merwe, 1945. *Trek: Studies oor die Mobiliteit van die Pioniersbevolking aan die Kaap*. (Cape Town (etc)., Nasionale Pers, 1945), 121-6.
3. Nigel Penn, 'Land, labour and livestock in the Western Cape during the eighteenth century', in Wilmot G. James and Mary Simons (eds), *The Angry Divide: social and economic history of the Western Cape*. (Cape Town and Johannesburg, David Philip, 1989), 2-19. *idem*, 'The /Xam and colony, 1740-1870', in P. Skotnes (ed.). *Sound from the Thinking Strings*. Cape Town, Axeage, 1991.
4. The published version of this text gives the mistranscriptions as I have rendered it, followed in brackets by the German *Buschmänner*. I do not know whether the addition was the editor's or Wurmb's, nor who made the spelling error in the original Dutch word *Bosjesman*.

Some of them have settled at our institute, and behave as quiet people, and show us all obedience.⁵

Wurmb's last comments may have been wishful thinking. The conversion of San to Christianity has been rare and often not very deep.⁶ His description of the conflicts between the San and farmers, on the one hand, is all too familiar. The interior of the Cape Colony was the scene of an intermittent but very ferocious guerilla war which lasted from the latter decades of the seventeenth century until deep in the nineteenth.⁷ The particular interest of these lies in what Wurmb recorded in his diary five days later, on 11 May 1830. Once again, this passage is worth translating in *extenso*:

We hear more and more of the robberies and murders of the Bushmen. Many of them have been captured by the farmers and brought to Clanwilliam gaol, where I visit them and preach the Christ whenever I come to Clanwilliam. Bushmen (or men who stay behind the bush), this gibe of the name is conferred on them because of their way of life. They call themselves *Naevii Ukaas*. It is generally believed here that this people are a tribe of Hottentots who have gone wild (*verwilderter Stamm der Hottentotten*), and indeed many travelling naturalist thinks this; however, I must refute this, as their bodies are built quite differently from those of the Hottentots. Their bone structure is much more delicate than and their physiognomy quite different from that of all the other tribes of South Africa; that they are so savage is manifestly on the conscience of the Europeans who live here and who treat them as dogs and shoot them dead whenever they can get hold of a single one. I have been an eye-witness at scenes which have totally outraged me; and since then I have daily implored God that these poor creatures be admitted to his mercy. The Bushmen are very cruel towards the old and sick from their own tribe; they abandon their own parents to starve when they can no longer follow under their own strength. I therefore interviewed a young Bushman who had been guilty of this course of action towards his father, and asked him if he remembered the kindnesses which his father had shown him from his childhood. O, he said, that was his duty, as it is mine towards my own children, and they will treat me no better when I become old. I have no sign whatever of belief among this nation; in this they are like unto the animals. Their only concern is eating, and, as long as they have something, they do this so immoderately, that when they are crammed full they cannot move for three or four days. I have myself seen that a Bushman with his wife and a seven-year old boy completely consume a fat African sheep in a single night, which I would not

5. *Berichte der Rheinische Missionsgesellschaft*, II, 1831, 42.

6. Alan Barnard, *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa: A comparative ethnography of the Khoisan peoples*. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), 263-4

7. e.g. Shula Marks, 'Khoisan resistance to the Dutch in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', *Journal of African History* 13 (1) 1972: 55-80; Susan Newton-King, 'The Enemy Within: the struggle for ascendancy on the Cape Eastern frontier, 1760-1799', Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1992. Penn, 'Land, labour and livestock', *idem*, 'The /Xam and the colony'; John Wright, *Bushman Raiders of the Drakensberg, 1840-1870* (Pietermaritzburg, University of the Natal Press) *idem*, 'San historians and non-San historians' *Collected Seminar Papers of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London: The Societies of Southern Africa in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 8: 1-14.

have countenanced if I had been told it. Against this, they can fast for a remarkable length of time. When they attack the herds of a colonist, they kill the herdsmen, eat the stock to their hearts's content and shoot the rest; then they take flight. They do not work at all, but they do manufacture their bows and arrows, and also large clay buckets in which to keep water. As bottles, to carry water on their journeys, they use empty ostrich eggs; tortoise shells are their bowls and ladles. They have sorcerers (*Zauberer*) among them, from whom, so they believe, death comes. They maintain that the sorcerer has power over the life and death of humans; therefore they honour their sorcerer and at their celebrations they dance around such a one, who sits in their middle. At this one hears the calls: *JKaá! JKaá! JKaá*, in other words, look kindly on us! Whoever makes the best bows, shoots the most game, collects the most wild honey, he is the most respected among them. The poison on their arrow is strong and causes immediate death. Despite all my efforts, I have not yet been able to discover what they make this poison from. If they shoot game or stock with these arrows, then they fall upon it straight away and cut out the poisoned part, with the arrowhead, with small pointed pieces of iron or sharp stones.

Apparently, Wurmb did not return to the Naevii Ukaas in his later diaries. Indeed he did not remain long in South Africa. Little more than a year later he left Wupperthal. In 1834 he was forced out of the mission by his fellow missionaries, ostensibly because he purchased the farm on which the mission station on Ebenhaezer was founded, and incurred a debt of £660, without consulting them. (Strassberger: 1969, 47)⁸ It may well have been the case, though, that is aristocratic background, manner and consequent assumption of leadership were bound to cause friction with his fellow missionaries, who came from much less exalted families.

There are a number of comments which need to be made about Wurmb's descriptions, fascinating though they are. The first is that his linguistic, and in particular phonetic, skills were not up to recording words in a Khoisan language in such a way as to make it clear what they in fact were. In particular the absence of signs for the clicks which were undoubtedly present in the words Wurmb gives can only cause uncertainties. Thus the possible transcriptions and translations of "Naevii Ukaas" are numerous, and probably all equally unconvincing. The last syllable could be read as "-quas", as in "Namaquas", and indeed the second word might be a corruption of "Ubiqua", a Cape Khoi word for "Bushmen".⁹ One then wonders whether "iWi", one of the terms for the language spoken by the /Xam,¹⁰ is not hidden somewhere inside "Naevii". On the other hand, "Jkaá"

8. Elfriede Strassberger, *The Rhenish Mission Society in South Africa, 1830-1950*. (Cape Town, Struik, 1969), 47. There is also a suggestion that his fault was committing adultery. (Scholtz, 'Historiese ontwikkeling', 121) While I have seen no confirmation of this, Wurmb would certainly not have been the only early nineteenth century missionary to have done so, and the published material on which I have relied would not have discussed such matters.

9. Richard Elphick, *Kraal and Castle: Khoikhoi and the founding of white South Africa*. (New Haven and London, Yale UP, 1977), 24.

10. Barnard, *Hunters and herders*, 79.

has been reconstructed as “//ka”, or “excellent”,¹¹ and this seems thoroughly plausible.

Secondly, the impression that Wurmb gives, namely that those men he met in the gaol had been active in the immediate neighbourhood of Wupperthal, does not seem to accord with the records relating to their arrest and trial. It would seem most likely that the men in question were those known to the colonial authorities as Jantje, Jonker Junior, Izaak and Jonker Senior, since these were the only “bushmen” to come up for trial at the visit of the circuit court to Clanwilliam following May 1830. On 7 January 1831, Jantje and Izaak were convicted of stealing two horses from Carel Aron van der Merwe in February of the previous year, and were sentenced each to a year’s hard labour. The two Jonkers were acquitted.¹² This they had done on the farm of Welbedagt, in the Agter Hantam fieldcornetcy, to the north of modern Calvinia. The reports from field-cornets at the time of their arrest suggest that they had only moved into the area very shortly before as a result of disagreements within their “family”.¹³

If these really are the men that Wurmb interviewed, then his testimony seems rather unreliable in its details, and thus ultimately in total. It is however just as possible that there is a lacuna in the archival record, or that the men whom Wurmb met were released without trial, perhaps for lack of the evidence that would stand up in court. Equally, Wurmb does not make it absolutely clear that all this ethnographic reporting derived from the men in the gaol. The “Bushman youth” he mentions may indeed have been one of the residents of Wupperthal, not one of the inmates of the prison. At any rate, there is no reason to suppose that Wurmb was lying. What he reported was what he understood he had been told. To some extent, of course, like all of us all the time, Wurmb heard what he expected to hear. Perhaps, too, his informants told him what they believed he would expect them to say, though if this is the case the degree of self-conscious image projection among the “Bushman” was greater than might be expected. Certainly, Wurmb’s description contains many of those traits which later became central to the stereotype of the “Bushman”, such as their supposed ability to eat enormous meals when food is available, and to fast for days when it is not.¹⁴ But these comments are no more than the normal strictures which should accompany any historical source, like a government health warning on a cigarette packet. With those provisos, what Theodore von Wurmb reported is, I believe, of considerable interest.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

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11. by Dr. D. Potyka of the University of Cologne, in a personal communication of 23.6.1992.

12. Indictment against Jantje c.s. 5 January 1831; Cape Archives Depot, CSC 1/2/1/6.

13. Nieuwoudt to Truter, 28.1.1830, Cape Archives Depot 1/WOC 13/22.

14. Robert Gordon, *The Bushman Myth: The making of a Namibian Underclass*. (Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford, Westview Press 1992), 4.