



The San and the story of #hannuwa

The San (known as the Bushmen in colonial times) are the only true indigenous people of South Africa. They are known to have been living here more than 80 000 years ago, and their way of living remained unchanged until the first of several waves of colonists began displacing or marginalising them 2 000 years ago.

Ꞗhannuwa*

The San were hunter-gatherers. They lived in highly mobile groups of between 20 and 50 people, following the game herds. They regulated their behaviour in harmony with plant and animal cycles, astral movements and climatic phenomena. For them the geography of their surroundings was sacred and they showed this by engraving and painting art on boulders, on the rock walls of shelters and on overhangs throughout the landscape. This secured a sense of place that found expression in their myths. The land was the source of life – a gift to mankind that nourishes, supports and teaches.

Indigenous peoples like the San in the Western Cape devised wise ways to protect their natural resources and, although they themselves had never heard of conservation, they could be called the original environmentalists. They avoided over-using food and water supplies by ranging over wide territories. They harvested only what nature would replenish. Land was not regarded as an asset to be owned. The San upheld many traditions which in most cases had positive impacts on the environment.

The San society was self-sufficient and sustainable. While today's societies are global and our progress is undeniable, our long-term sustainability has yet to be proven. Today, we face many challenges in our relationship with our environment and there is much that we can learn from our indigenous societies.

The language of the /Xam San was painstakingly transcribed by the German linguist Dr Wilhelm Bleek and his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, in the late 19th century. From this work we know that the /Xam language in itself is metaphorical and abstract when denoting certain ideas, especially if used to convey 'feeling' concepts such as life, nature, harmony or even mother earth. A word/verb that is associated with good fortune (as in having enough to eat or to gather) is Ꞗhannuwa, meaning to be 'comfortable, happy, good, nice or fortunate' (Bleek 1956). It is a collective word suggesting a life of harmony and plenty; in other words, success in sustaining life. It may be used to suggest the wine growing industry as being Ꞗhannuwa, in succeeding in sustaining nature in the successful gathering of fortune. Here is a quote using this word (translated) from Diä!kwain, the Bushman teacher of San ritual concepts from the Katkop hills in the Northern Cape, considering the good fortune of hunting and gathering when the moon grows:

"When our mothers saw the moon, when they saw that the moon did not lie hollow, they spoke, they said, 'This moon is a good moon; it does not carry people, for it carries as a man does when he carries food, when he has put food into the net. It seems as if it knew that our men will carry; therefore it carries with the net. It seems as if it knew that our folk will go out and find food, that their going will be fortunate...'" (Lewis-Williams 2000:249 Stories that float from afar: ancestral folklore of the San of Southern Africa Cape Town: David Phillip)

Wines of South Africa is using the word Ꞗhannuwa to encapsulate the philosophy of the wine industry as embodied in the pledge that our producers are signing, namely:

- To farm sustainably.
- To be a custodian of the land and preserve it for our future generations.
- To nurture a culture of respect among the people who work with us on our farms and in our cellars.
- To promote an environment of dignity, equality and upliftment for all.
- To protect the unique and valuable biodiversity of our winelands.
- To safeguard the rich heritage of South Africa's winelands.

The South African wine producers are embracing this ancient wisdom with enthusiasm, for we ignore it at our peril.

* Ꞗ or Alveolar click. The front part of the tongue more than the tip is pressed against the alveolar ridge and drawn sharply downward when released. Some English-speakers use this sound to express sympathy.