

The San (sAWn): a modern hunter-gatherer society

Living off the environment

The modern hunter-gatherers in southern Africa are the San people. At the moment there are about 95,000 San people. But only 3,000 of them kept their traditional lifestyle of hunters and gatherers. It is believed that the San people have one of the oldest cultures on our planet. Their culture is more than 100,000 years old.



The San mostly survive by hunting Gemsbok and other antelope and gathering plants. Hunter-gatherer societies hunt, fish and gather wild plants to survive. They also move around from place to place, following a nomadic¹ way of life.

The invention of the bow and arrow.

The San invented their own type of bow and arrow in order to hunt effectively. They use a hand bow and arrows with poisoned heads. After carefully stalking the animal whose tracks they have been following, they prepare to shoot. They shoot only once within shooting range. After hitting the animal, the narrow shaft of the arrow falls on the ground but the poisoned head remains in the wound, slowly sedating² the animal. The poison penetrates through the blood system. The time needed to sedate the animal varies with the place where it is hit and the size of the animal.

It could take days of tracking before the animal collapses. Once the animal starts to weaken it can be approached. Further suffering is stopped by using spears for a final blow. This way, San can successfully hunt any animal, no matter what the size.

Social organization

Hunter-gatherers do not live in permanent houses, but in shelters made of materials they find around them, like thin branches and tall grass, or even caves. Women are responsible for building shelters and can do so very quickly. They never settle in the same campsite, but use the same waterholes as they

¹ living the life of a nomad; wandering

² make them sleep by administering a sedative drug

move around. This also ensures that the land did not become exhausted³. The San also believe that no individual owns the land and that everybody has the right to use it. Like many groups that depend on the land for survival, they regard it as sacred and respect it as a gift of God.



The most important part of the San's life is fire. The men are responsible for making fire and use two fire sticks that they carry with them at all times. They rub the two sticks together until it made a spark to light some dry grass. Their lives revolve around their fire because it provides warmth, light and a way to cook food. The family will also hang their possessions in bushes close to the fire.

Water is also very important in the dry Kalahari Desert and the San store their precious liquid in the shell of an ostrich eggs under the ground where it stays cool.

The San's clothing is very simple and made from available materials like leather from the game they catch. Children sometimes only wear beads and the men short leather pants, while women wear their karosses, or leather cloaks, made of the whole skin of an antelope.

San children are not forced to work when they were young and mostly play and copy the things their parents did. The boys play with little bows and arrows while the girls learn how to dig up food and carry it home, just like their mothers.

The San culture allows for more than three or four families living together in a group or band. This could be anything from 15 to 40 people.

The San have no chiefs or leaders and nobody is given special importance. A young person's first wedding is normally arranged by his or her parents. At the wedding the young man will have to bring an animal that he had killed as proof to his in-laws that he could provide for their daughter. The bride's mother will adorn her daughter with the fat of this animal and mix it with red powder (ochre) to draw lines on her cheeks. The groom would then move in with the families of his wife to serve them.

San beliefs and religion

The religion of the San revolves mainly around Kaggen, the creator of many things. He's in many myths portrayed as wise, foolish, tiresome or helpful. "Kaggen" translates as "mantis" which is why many people believe that the San worship the Preying Mantis. This is not true as Kaggen can take on different

³ loss of important topsoil and minerals needed to grow crops

forms, such as animals and men. Many rituals include the eland cow, because it is believed to be Kaggen's favorite animal. Some rituals include the boy's first kill, girls puberty, marriage, and the trance⁴ dance, which is done to heal the sick. Instead of using medicine, they have a medicine man or shaman that does a trance dance to connect with the spirits to make them leave, therefore causing the illness to go away.

⁴ a half-conscious state, between sleeping and waking

1. What evidence indicates that the San's culture is one of the oldest on our planet?
 - a. 3,000 San practice their traditional lifestyle
 - b. The San are hunter-gatherers
 - c. The culture is 100,000 years old
 - d. all of the above.
2. If you follow a **NOMADIC** life, you will most likely--
 - a. hunt, fish and gather wild plants
 - b. make bows and arrows
 - c. build homes to live in
 - d. move around from place to place
3. Number the following steps of hunting in the right order.
 - a. ___ carefully stalk the animal for days
 - b. ___ the arrow's shaft falls and the poison head remains in the animal
 - c. ___ use a spear to kill the animal
 - d. ___ the animal becomes slowly sedated and collapses
4. Underline the text that BEST demonstrates nomadic behavior:
 - a. "[The San make shelters from] materials they find around them, like thin branches and tall grass, or even caves."
 - b. "Women are responsible for building shelters."
 - c. "The San also believe that no individual owns the land."
 - d. "They regard it as sacred and respect it as a gift of God."
5. Explain why fire is of great importance to the San.

6. "San children are not forced to work when they were young and mostly play and copy the things their parents did. The boys play with little bows and arrows while the girls learn how to dig up food and carry it home, just like their mothers." From this text we can BEST conclude that--
 - a. San parents don't spend time with their children
 - b. San children pretend to be their parents
 - c. San parents teach by example
 - d. San children learn to work pretending to be their parents

7. In what ways does a young man prove his worth as a husband to the parents of his wife?

8. Identify 3 natural resources and explain how they are used in San culture.
