

## SISTER MARIYA'S ACCOUNT OF SAN PAINTING IN THE TSOLO DISTRICT IN THE LATE 1920's AND EARLY 1930's

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### ABSTRACT

Some notes are presented of San painting and hunting among Mpondomise as witnessed by Sister Mariya CR (1913-1998) during her education at St Augustine's School, Tsolo, 1926-1933.

### BACKGROUND

Jolly (1999) has sought to identify the last San informants from the Tsolo District, Eastern Cape. This information was brought to my attention by Lita Webley with the suggestion that general information about a San presence in that district in the 1920's and 1930's might be of some interest to archaeologists. What follows is based on my notes of the recollections (as jotted down during interviews) of an 83 year old nun, Sister Mariya CR, of her orphaned adolescence at St Cuthbert's Mission, Tsolo, between 1926 and 1933.

While writing *The Prophetic Nun* (Butler 2000), one of my chief informants was Sister Mariya CR. I interviewed her at least four times at St Luke's, Donkin Street, Grahamstown, between 1996 and 1997. The purpose of these interviews was to gather information about the work of artist nuns, Sister Margaret CR and Sister Pauline CR. By chance we discovered a mutual amateur interest in the San, and she volunteered information spontaneously and responded to my occasional questions. Among my copious notes are many peripheral observations by her on the San. These memories were not elicited by the questions of an expert in search of information about the San. They are marginal and incidental, and based on the scribbled notes of an amateur. The memories are those of someone who had been completely at ease with the San as an adolescent. She liked remembering those times.

\* Prof Guy Butler submitted the above article to *Southern African Field Archaeology* in March 2000 and was in the process of making corrections when he passed away in 2001. On the advice of one of the referees, the editors have decided to publish the manuscript unedited. We do so as we believe this is a valuable account of the way of life of the last of the south-eastern San. Unfortunately Prof Butler was not prepared to allow an archaeologist to interview Sister Mariya before her death in 1998, so that much of the finer details of this account has been lost.

There were only three real, wandering San families in the area, she said, but there were also several mixed families, in which the husband was a Xhosa and the wife San, or part San. These were generally accepted in Xhosa social life. This meant that she had first hand experiences of both pure San and Xhosa customs, and was at points painfully aware of the differences between the cultures. The few pure San were hospitable and seemed to have enjoyed playing hosts at feasts and dances attended by more participants than they alone could rally.

On 7 April 1996, I used these notes for a brief thumbnail sketch of her life and character, including only what seemed relevant to the biographies of the artistic nuns. Fortunately, I did not throw my pages of jottings away. As her unusual origins equipped her for her exceptional experiences, a sketch of them is necessary.

### BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS ON SISTER MARIYA (1913-1998)

Mary McAllister was born in 1913, in Idutywa, Transkei; daughter of Alexander McAllister and Norma Nozana, a Xhosa social worker. Her mother died in 1923 when she was ten years old. McAllister sent his children to school at St Cuthbert's Mission, Tsolo, to which St Augustine's was attached. He did not succeed in establishing a new home to which his so-called 'coloured' children were happy to return.

The reliability of Mariya's memory is corroborated by the following account of the McAllister children's relationship with St Augustine's obtained from Sister Joan Elizabeth, archivist of the Community of Saint Mary the Virgin, Wantage, England (Letter 30/09/1999).

"Mary (Sister Mariya) and two of her sisters, Nancy and Elsie, arrived in 1926/7. Elizabeth and Michael came in 1928, brought by brother Monty, who did not live at home. They all seemed to have been cut off from their family life, and did not go home for school holidays".

Clearly, Alexander the widower could not manage his children. Sister Mariya volunteered that “we were shuttled about amongst relations” presumably of Norma, who might not have been particularly welcoming to ‘coloured’ children.

The author submitted Sister Mariya’s recollections to Prof D. Hammond Tooke, who knows the area well. He writes, “Rest assured, I know nothing that would impugn the reliability of Sister Mariya’s evidence. Everything she told you rings true. I also heard stories of the famous three families living on the Inxu River” (14/04/2000).

### CONVERSATIONS WITH SISTER MARIYA (1996-7)

“What were the Bushmen like?” I asked. “Little chaps”, said Sister Mariya with a careful gesture, “about four foot high”. The three San families came and went unpredictably in the Tsolo mountains. This is compatible with Jolly’s account (1986:6-9).

But most pertinent to the situation in which Mariya became acquainted with them is the distinction maintained between the pure San hunter-gatherers and the part-San cattle keeping pastoralists like the mixed Mpondomisi. That they joined forces for feasting and hunting seems clear.

How (1962:33) reported on her conversation with a Mpondomisi who knew and understood the double standard well, “Mapote was one of the younger sons of the great Chief Morosi. He was born at Bolepeletsa, his mother being Pandomisi and an inferior wife of Chief Morosi... He told me that he and his half-bush stepbrothers, the sons of Morosi’s Bush wives, used to paint at one end of the cave, whilst the true Bushmen painted at the other”.

For the most part Mariya is remembering life in mixed San/Mpondomise families, and she is aware of this divide. With these mixed families she spent much time, living with them in their huts, and learning a great deal from the San wife/mother. “They were affectionate and sweet natured. I made many friends among them”.

She made repeated references to “St Augustine’s in the mountains”. It became clear that she was referring to some other place called after Augustine than St Augustine’s School, which is within walking distance of St Cuthbert’s. And there is indeed such a place to the north-west in the direction of Maclear. It was founded in 1865, “but is now an outstation of St Cuthbert’s Mission” (Cowley Evangelist July 1904:157).

At no point did I ask a question about language, but I presume that they communicated in Xhosa, her mother’s tongue. She did, however, volunteer that she learnt the San clicks. This might mean that she learnt those clicks which had not already been incorporated into Xhosa speech in past times. The survival was sufficient to warrant attention, in 1932, of the linguist Dr H. Anders who interviewed two speakers in the Tsolo district (Jolly 1999:62).

The real ‘unmixed San’ came and stayed in the caves for varying lengths of time, and then disappeared. She “never discovered how far it stretched. They moved from place to place, following the game”. They were very mobile. “I met a party of their women at the Bashee”. It seems probable

that they made excursions into Lesotho.

The missionaries did not mind the children mixing with them either. “There was no trouble with the Fathers (Society of St John the Evangelist) except when the Bushmen stole stock”. “They lived a very pleasant family life. They were great entertainers. Dancing and eating went together. After a hunt, the prey was brought to be shared. They had no pots. The meat was roasted on the coals”. “They wore skin aprons back and front. They painted their bodies, black and white, all over at special times; on the face with dots, straight lines on the body”. This tallies well with Stow (1905).

“The children never went to school at all”. Had she seen them painting? “Yes, the inside of their huts”. “Did you see them painting on rocks or caves?”. “Yes. In the caves near St Cuthbert’s. Both men and women painted, but not on the same painting. Otherwise they worked together, real Bushmen”.

She volunteered authenticating specifics. In the context of body painting, usually before dances, and hence before the blood of the kill was available, she said: “The paints were mixed with chicken or bird droppings, *not* (emphatic) the white of eggs”.

“They used earth colours. They were very particular where they got their clay, it had to be just the right clay from certain dongas”.

What did they use for a brush? “It was made from the root of a bush which turns to fibre when you knock it between stones” (see Jolly 1999:61).

She returned to the matter of painting several times, of their bodies for special occasions like dances, the inside of their huts, and of rocks and caves. Most interesting was the observation that everyone painted, both men and women. She never mentioned a specialist San painter or shaman. When they used blood for painting they mixed it with the juice of a plant which stops clotting. Their favourite colours were brown, orange and black. She mentioned protracted feasting and frenzied dancing around the fire, the men close to the flames, the women singing and hand-clapping. She never saw nose-bleeds nor witnessed a laying on of hands.

What did they paint? She was not very clear in her recollections. “Cattle and people. Cattle being pursued by people, and trying to kill one”. She then said, somewhat inconsistently, it was “a real hunt, not to torture. When the Xhosa pursue the cattle, the beast that cried (bellowed) was chosen for the death, which was not cruel”.

When questioned on this fascinating comment, she said that by “a real hunt” she meant that a single animal had been stalked and shot with bow and arrow. But in a real hunt the animal would have been an eland or other buck, not cattle, however. Perhaps there were no eland available and the San had to make do with cattle. (For the substitution of eland by cattle, see Campbell *et al.* 1994:155-6).

From some of her observations, it seems that there were select hunts, feasts and painting sessions for the few San left (three families) and open feasts and hunts in which the mixed families might join.

“The paintings (at the caves) was done during and after a feast. For a proper hunting the feast took place in the cave”. In addition to the fire made in the cave after a proper

hunting (which would, presumably, be hosted by the 'real' Bushmen) there were other feasts. "They had a great feast whenever there had been a kill, much celebration and dancing themselves into a frenzy, not in the cave but in front of it". This could have been dictated by the need for space. Most caves are 'overhangs' with limited and irregular floors.

This timing of hunting, feasting and painting accorded well with the impression conveyed by my rock-art reading, and led to the question; "Were the paintings holy?". "Oh no! The paintings were not holy. There was nothing holy about the Bushmen. Everything was just natural".

"But were not the eland very special?". "The eland was quite a part of it, because it gave a lot of meat". Animals were hunted individually. She never witnessed "a wholesale slaughter on animals". The San killed the animals in "a proper hunt, with bows and arrows". She insisted on this. Xhosa hunts were frequently aimed at killing many animals, by ambush or encirclement.

She said some paintings were done "high up in the mountains, far away". The painters found painting very relaxing. These sessions seem to have been different from the paintings that were done at the San home with frenetic feasting and dancing. She remembers them painting "funny animals with long necks". This could support the thesis that while painting was a normal activity which anyone might enjoy, there were special places for painting unusual animals, creatures with long necks (not game or cattle), places characterised by deep relaxation (trance?) and not by eating and dancing around a fire.

She emphasised San knowledge of the medicinal, sedative and poisonous properties of plants. They used herbs for medicines, were "great takers of snuff made from a special tree", she thought a sneeze wood. They were also "great smokers with clay pipes, and planted both tobacco and dagga. They sucked the pipe through a reed and spewed out water".

Broster (1982:87) ascribes important healing functions of the Xhosa *amagqirha* to the San pharmacopia. "Their (Xhosa patients') psychoses are controlled through the use of sedatives, herbal extracts and snuffs being administered as tranquilisers". Any doubt about the San influence on *amagqirha* is dispelled by their use of "a black powder called *intsizi yaba Thiza* (the powder of the Bushmen)" (Broster 1982:80).

She did have some first-hand, if brief, acquaintance with the San of South West Africa. By 1933 she had moved to Sonnebloem College, Cape Town. At the age of twenty, she was a member of a party of student teachers who went to that territory. She was now a tourist, not a participant. Their experience of the San had been organised. Their vehicle was followed by a large number of men. She thought their antics were those of "show-offs". They were very clever at

imitating the movements of animals. During one dance "the men made a drumming noise from the bottom of their stomachs".

It is to be regretted that she did not link the "drumming sound" to a dance imitating a particular animal. There are two obvious candidates. The roar of the lion strikes terror into the living world, yet the noise which a male ostrich can make is more impressive. Bleek and Lloyd (1911:126-35) provided the following reason, "The male ostrich was some distance from the women when the lion roared. The women did not applaud. But when the ostrich called, sounding afar, the women exclaimed "I do wish the lion called in this manner, for he sounds as if he put his tail into his mouth, while the ostrich calls in a resounding manner" ... "The ostrich calls with his lungs ... from his chest's front. Thou dost call with thy mouth, therefore thou dost not call nicely".

Dorothea Bleek (1928), while among the Naron of the central Kalahari, watched "about six Bushmen in a circle performing the Ostrich Dance". It seems probable that Sister Mariya, about a decade later, witnessed something similar. But she speaks of these San as a tourist might of foreigners, not with the pleasant familiarity which marked her childhood recollections.

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