

## “DE-!KUNGING” THE LATER STONE AGE OF THE CENTRAL INTERIOR OF SOUTH AFRICA.

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### ABSTRACT

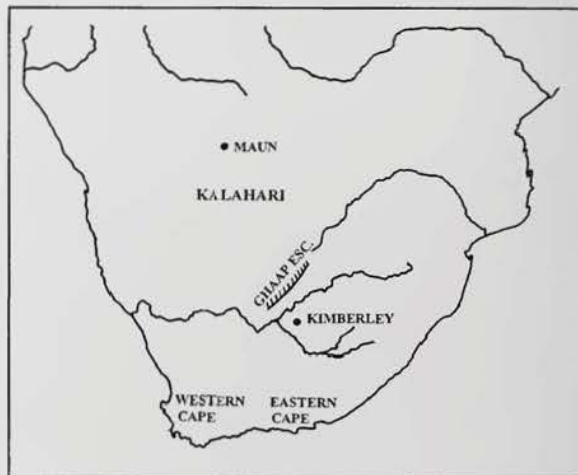
This contribution has as its point of departure a project on the Later Stone Age (LSA) based on the Ghaap Escarpment area during the 1970s (Humphreys 1979). Following the trend at the time, use was made of Kalahari analogues in trying to make sense of the excavated material. With the benefit of hindsight, it will now be argued that the use of Kalahari analogues is inappropriate to the understanding the LSA archaeological record in the central interior of South Africa. This is because the ethnography generally used reflects ‘aberrant’ hunter-gatherer behaviour patterns that cannot be projected back uncritically into the past. It will be suggested that, if ‘modern’ analogues are to be used, the Australian Aborigines are possibly more relevant as they were ‘pristine’ hunter-gatherers until European colonisation in that there was not an intervening period of contact and interaction with indigenous herding and mixed farming communities.

### INTRODUCTION

During the 1970s I undertook excavations in a series of small Later Stone Age (LSA) rock shelters located along the edge of the Ghaap Escarpment (Fig. 1). The results from these, as well as other material, formed the basis of a Ph.D thesis (Humphreys 1979). Underlying the arguments presented in the thesis were two main concerns - a) lithic patterns as a reflection of ‘culture history’ and, b) the identification of possible evidence for seasonal mobility. This latter endeavour was in the forefront of many research efforts at that time, following upon the seminal paper by Parkington (1972): “Seasonal mobility in the Late Stone Age”. Parkington’s model was, in turn, inspired by Richard Lee’s work on the !Kung in the Kalahari which was, itself, very influential at the time - and continues to be so, despite the fact that a wide range of groups have now been the subject of intensive research (see, for example, Mitchell 2002:223).

Leaving aside the lithic patterns for the moment, the net result of my research efforts was that I was unable to identify any evidence for seasonality and I attributed this to what I called a ‘uniform environment’ where human subsistence needs operated ‘below’ any ecological constraints (Humphreys 1979). This I contrasted with ‘seasonal resource zonation’ (*i.e.* summer versus winter) in the Kalahari and ‘spatial resource zonation’ (*i.e.* contrasting adjacent ecological zones) in the Western Cape where, I suggested, ‘stress points’ led to migratory pressures or incentives (Fig. 2).

The 1980s saw the intensification of the ‘Great Kalahari



**Fig. 1. The approximate location of places and areas mentioned in the text.**

Debate’ and, along with it, I became more sceptical about the use of Kalahari analogues. I was intrigued by a remark by Donald (1987) to the effect that, “There is the very real possibility that much of !Kung ‘harmlessness’ is the result of !Kung ‘helplessness’, *i.e.* one of the outcomes of defeat. It is quite possible that current !Kung social behaviour (and that of many - all? - other extreme egalitarians) is the product of devolution rather than evolution”. As a part of my reassessment of the ‘Kalahari scenario’, I looked more closely at the rainfall patterns of Maun (representing,

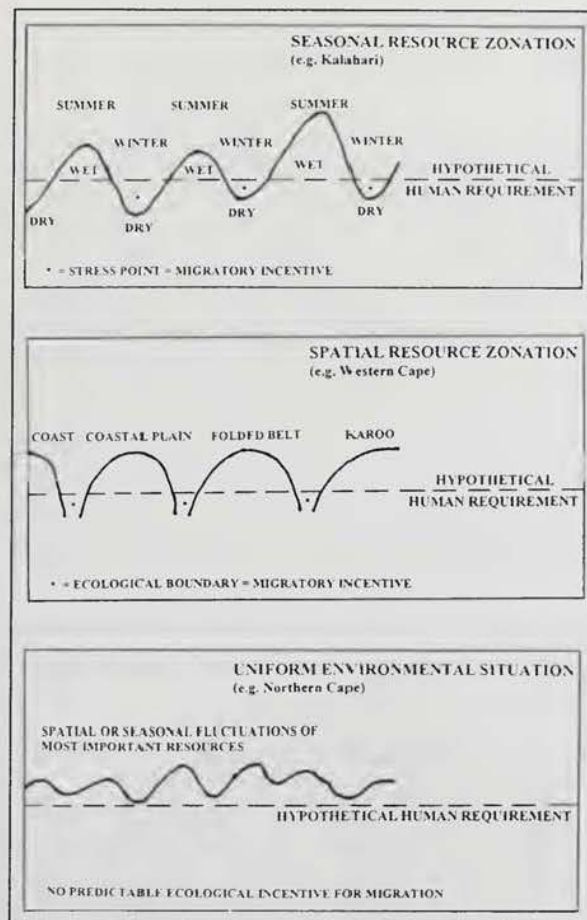


Fig. 2. Hypothetical responses to resource zonation in the Kalahari, Western Cape and Northern Cape.

probably most closely, the Kalahari) and Kimberley and found them to be very similar; indeed, Kimberley suffered 'severe drought' more often than Maun (Humphreys 1987). While the environment is clearly more than simply rainfall, it is worth noting that Biesele (1971:65) and Lee (1979:312) both point out that it is water and not the presence of game or plant resources that is the primary reason for mobility patterns among the !Kung and G/wi. I wondered, therefore, why seasonal mobility existed in the modern Kalahari but, apparently, not in the prehistoric Northern Cape - or, at least, so far as my research had been able to detect. I thus posed the question: "Prehistoric seasonal mobility: what are we really achieving?" and suggested that perhaps we were looking for something that did not exist. From then on I have still been wondering, have we actually got it wrong by using 'aberrant' hunter-gatherer patterns from the Kalahari and projecting them back into the LSA - in short, creating a skewed past in the image of the modern !Kung? There have been several developments which now suggest to me that we have been misguided in this endeavour and I want to address some of them briefly here as food for thought rather than as providing a definitive answer to the question.

## A BRIEF DETOUR TO AUSTRALIA

I want to suggest that if we are looking for more appropriate modern hunter-gatherer analogues in trying to understand the LSA, we should turn to the Australian Aborigines. At the outset I must, however, first preface my remarks with the following observation by Bailey (1980:340): "It is increasingly obvious that Aboriginal society was not static, and that contemporary observations and analogues cannot be extrapolated indefinitely into the past but must be complemented by independent archaeological evidence". Thus, even here we are not 'safe' but we are, I believe, 'better off'. The point about the Aborigines is that they were 'pristine' hunter-gatherers until European colonisation to the extent that there was not an intervening period of contact and interaction with indigenous mixed farming communities, as was the case in southern Africa. There is, therefore, no hunter-gatherer/pastoralist interaction and accompanying identity issues *a la* Smith (e.g. 1990), no hunter-gatherer/agriculturalist interaction *a la* Jolly (e.g. 1996) and no pre-colonial marginalisation as some revisionists have, probably quite correctly, suggested for southern Africa (e.g. Gordon 1992, though the literature is extensive). Thus, when contacted, the Australian Aborigines are likely to have exhibited a pattern more appropriate to southern African hunter-gatherers at, say, 2 000 plus years ago than the San even at the time of their first contact with Europeans, let alone from the mid-1960s. In short, the Aborigines are a more appropriate source of analogues for the LSA than are modern Kalahari hunter-gatherers.

Let us examine this proposition. The first permanent European settlement in Australia was established at Sydney in 1788. The first settlers were convicts rather than colonists but the first free settlers were to arrive in 1793. The first exploration beyond the eastern mountains (the Great Dividing Range) took place in 1813 (at a time, incidentally, when William Burchell and others were exploring the area north of the Orange River). What did these first colonists find?

The Australian Aboriginal population was estimated at some 250 - 300 000 people who spoke upwards of 500 languages and dialects; of these about 200 were "mutually unintelligible ... as different as Russian and English" (Flood 1983:196; see also Clark 1983:39 and Ucko 1983:31). These groups were, and are, described as 'tribes' which are "characterised by possession of a common language, territory, identity and culture" and number around 500 individuals (Flood 1983:181). It is, however, acknowledged that 'tribe' is an inaccurate term in that it implies a form of political organisation that never existed in Australia; it is used, for want of a better term, to refer to a "major landowning group" (Australian Info International 1989:14). Aboriginal 'tribes' were enormously diverse - the only common element was a dependence on hunting and gathering. They even still differ physically as a result of their adaptation to the various environments (Furb 1978:225-6). This diversity - linguistically and physically - reflects a high degree of territoriality. Indeed, Radcliffe-Brown

(1918) noted that some of the 'tribes' he studied were prepared to defend their territorial boundaries by force. Beattie (1964:3) has observed that "... a stranger who cannot prove that he is kin to the group, far from being welcomed hospitably as a fellow human, is regarded as a dangerous outsider and may be speared without compunction". Flood (1983:224) has even stated that, "It has been suggested that new elements such as agriculture (from New Guinea) did not penetrate prehistoric Australia because of hostility on the part of the Aborigines to new-comers".

Today much of this pre-contact diversity has disappeared in the face of colonisation but major culture areas can still be identified (Fig. 3; Flood 1983:193). Yet, interestingly, when we look at the lithics going back to the time when high diversity seems to have been even more pronounced, we find that such diversity does not show up in the archaeological record (Fig. 4; Flood 1983:187). This must reflect a problem that exists in South Africa as well as Australia, namely, that our studies of lithic patterns are too crude and that our level of analysis does not highlight major social and territorial differences that might have been there. Mithen (1996:149) has put it neatly with reference to the Early Stone Age but it surely applies equally in principle to the LSA: "As archaeologists we are left with a million years of technical monotony that mask a million years of socially and economically flexible behaviour". I return to this point below.

#### A RETURN TO SOUTH AFRICA

If we bring only these very basic Australian Aboriginal patterns across to South Africa, some interesting parallels become obvious. These can be summarised as follows:

##### a) Linguistic Diversity.

Although most San/Bushman languages are extinct today, we know that a great variety of languages existed in the past. This was clearly recognised from historical times. Moffat (1842), for example, commented on "The variety of languages spoken by the Bushmen, even when nothing but a range of hills, or a river intervenes between tribes ...". Similarly, Orpen (1877:85) quotes a man from Bethulie, about 110 km south-east of the Kalkfontein Dam on the Riet River in the Free State, as saying, "I can speak Bushman language well, but I cannot understand the Bushmen of Riet River; their language is 'too double' ". The late Ernst Westphal, a pioneer in Bushman language studies, described the differences as being "like English is to Chinese" (comment in a Southern Sotho class at the University of Cape Town, 1965). Major current researchers like Traill (e.g. 1995) have access only to the last remains of language diversity which must have paralleled the position among the Australian Aborigines (Fig. 5). This language diversity might well have been connected with a second feature noted among the Aborigines.

##### b) Territoriality

The Aborigines were clearly highly territorial, as already

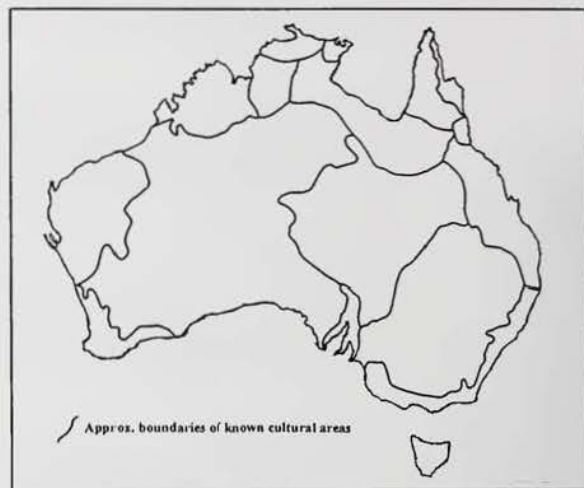


Fig. 3. Approximate boundaries of known cultural areas in Australia (simplified from Flood 1983:193).

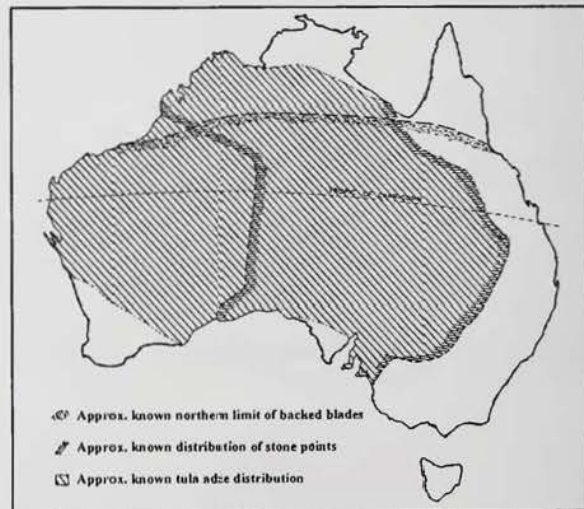


Fig. 4. Approximate distribution of selected artefact types in Australia (adapted from Flood 1983:187).

pointed out, but what of the position in South Africa? For some years now Sealy and others have been concerned with reconstructing prehistoric dietary patterns on the basis of isotope analysis. From her initial major contribution, Sealy (1986) cast doubt on the seasonal mobility hypothesis by showing that some groups in the south-western Cape did indeed spend their whole lives at the coast rather than moving seasonally between the coast and the Cape Fold Mountains as envisaged by Parkington. Subsequent work in the same area has continued to support Sealy's position. In a recent publication Sealy, *et al.* (2000:41) note with regard to three child skeletons that they "ate diets based on terrestrial foods, clearly separating them from coastal skeletons with similar dates. This finding supports earlier suggestions that, in this part of the Western Cape, hunter-gatherers from the Fold Mountain Belt were economically



Fig. 5. Some surviving San/Bushman languages (adapted from Mitchell 2002:126).

and hence socially distinct from those at the coast . . ." An equivalent study on diet and landscape use in the Eastern Cape has elicited comments such as the following: "The isotopic contrasts are clear indicators of economic differences between adjacent groups of hunter-gatherers and, we believe, *evidence for territorial boundaries in the past*" (Sealy & Pfeiffer 2000:654; my emphasis). Sealy and Pfeiffer (2000:654) go on to challenge the Kalahari-inspired approach directly where they observe, "... there is a pervasive underlying assumption among archaeologists that Later Stone Age hunter-gatherers lived in mobile bands, ranging over long distances, as in the Kalahari. Our results indicate that this expectation is not necessarily met, at least for some groups in the southern Cape".

In another perspective on territoriality, Deacon (1986) has shown in the Northern Cape that distinct territorially based dialectal groups may be identified in the ethnographic record even where there are no ecological or other barriers to interaction. In trying to account for this linguistic diversity, Deacon & Deacon (1999:132) have recently referred to the concept of 'topophilia' which is "the affective bond between a people and the landscape in which they live that extends into a desire to stress the individuality of the group" (my emphasis). They go on to point out that, "The power of the bond that developed between the San and their surroundings is obvious from remarks they made about the land they regarded as *their own*. ... the rich folklore surrounding features in the landscape underscores this" (again, my emphasis). Language diversity (and topophilia) must reflect a deeper great emphasis on territoriality in the past that has apparently been neglected in southern Africa but has been recognised in Australia. If such is the case, a challenge for South African archaeology becomes taking account of such territoriality in the past.

Moreover, with reference to the /Xam area studied by Bleek and Lloyd, Deacon (1986) notes that there was no seasonal mobility "although the informants were certainly

aware of the seasonal availability of food". Is this further evidence of territoriality?

These above features cannot be explained within the Kalahari analogue paradigm - they are 'anomalies', one might say - yet they parallel patterns that seem to have existed among the Aborigines. This 'anomalous situation' is compounded if we consider a further point that is seemingly overlooked in southern Africa.

### c) Continuity

It has been pointed out that there is no demonstrable continuity or link between the modern San and the LSA (Mithen 2004:568, note 14). This 'link' was disrupted by the arrival of mixed farmers and pastoralists about 2 000 years ago. This is something that is, of course, unparalleled in Australia. Yet this lack of continuity in southern Africa is manifest if we look closely at the evidence. We have no ethnographic accounts of San life in caves and rock shelters - a major focus of LSA research (Barham 1992:45). 'Open air' activities need not necessarily parallel 'cave/shelter' activities. This latter point is highlighted for the Kalahari by Drotsky's Cave. Excavations by Robbins in the mid-1990s revealed occupation from about 30 000 to around 4.4 to 4.1 thousand years ago (Mithen 2004:568, note 11). Yet when Yellen asked modern-day !Kung about the cave, they believed it had only ever been used as a place to collect honey; they had never camped in the cave itself (Mithen 2004:468). One might well ask why? Is/was there a different attitude to caves? If so, what are the implications of this for parts of South Africa, like the central interior, where caves are rare? Or, indeed, coastal areas where cave sites have been the focus of research and upon which Parkington's seasonal mobility model was based?

## DISCUSSION

I would suggest that a major point that we have to accept is that 'Stone Age' people no longer exist in southern Africa - or Australia. If we acknowledge this, how do we address the Stone Age past? Two issues seem to arise:

As we have already seen, our lithic analyses seem to mask social patterns like territoriality even if we can detect time trends in artefact frequencies and dimensions. This was my experience in the Northern Cape in the 1970s. Since then, however, more sophisticated types of analysis have been developed. Among these are Wadley's (1987) work on gender relations, social obligations and aggregation/dispersal sites but these still mainly follow Kalahari ethnography. Mazel (1989) has adopted a historical materialist approach with an emphasis on 'people to people' rather than 'people to land'. Both of these researchers have (rightly or wrongly) come in for criticism by Barham (1992) who suggests we should "walk before we run". I would suggest that as a first step we should try to address territoriality which was clearly a fundamental factor in the past. Ouzman (1995:15, note 3) anticipated this in the following remark: "Territoriality is a function of all mammals and we can predict that it will be present at some

level in human communities". This enterprise can be advanced by more intensive isotope studies along the lines of the work of Sealy and others, referred to above, but extending into the central interior when this becomes feasible. We need, further, to complement this work by looking for 'trace elements' (for want of a better term) in assemblages. I have suggested bifacial tanged and barbed arrowheads as one example of a possible significant trace element with territorial and social implications (Humphreys 1984). Mitchell (2002:294-5) has elaborated on this idea, while Ouzman (1995), in the field of rock art, has referred to the representation of mormyrid fish as social network markers. The answers, if we are to find them, probably lie in the subtle detail, not the 'macro' which has tended to be emphasised in the traditional culture history model.

On the other hand, what are the implications of this territorial approach for both regions in terms of the 'history' of existing alleged 'Stone Age' people? As Mithen (2004:358) has observed, "The Stone Age is politically potent, ready to be exploited by politicians for their own ends". A study by Saethre (2004) in the Northern Territories of Australia has shown that local Aborigines still insist on being regarded as 'hunter-gatherers', as a political statement against the establishment, even though such hunting and gathering (when it occurs) is now carried out with the aid of 4x4 vehicles and guns and bullets. Saethre, an enthusiastic walker, was regarded as 'eccentric' by the local Aborigines among whom he lived - why walk if you can drive?

In southern Africa, I believe (and this is by no means an original idea) that the Kalahari San represent recent readaptations to (or reconfigurations of) hunting and gathering from engagement with pastoral and farming lifestyles due to social and economic oppression and environmental change (cf. Mithen 2004:568, note 14). This is true of all surviving groups, not only the 'archaeologically favoured' !Kung, even if some of the more extreme claims of 'encapsulation' within extensive Iron Age political and economic hierarchies cannot fully be sustained (cf. Denbow 1990; Sadr 1997). Attempts to 'preserve' these (re-) adaptations lead to Kagga Kamma-like situations of 'staged ethnicity' (White 1993). While these are good, no doubt, for the tourist industry, they are irrelevant to the archaeological past. Similarly, much in the news at present is the Botswana Government's policy on what it calls 'Remote Area Dwellers' (RADs), including large numbers of San (or Basarwa to use the Botswana term), who are being 'forcibly removed' from the Central Kalahari Game Reserve. Is this policy the adoption of a realistic approach based on modern realities - or genocide as some suggest? (check 'Basarwa' on 'Google' for ongoing reporting.) As Mithen says, "The Stone Age is politically potent". But, either way in Botswana, is this relevant archaeologically when it comes to understanding the LSA?

#### CONCLUSION

It seems clear, even on the basis of this cursory discussion (and this is all that it aspires to be), that there is sufficient

reason for us to "de-!Kung" the central interior, and, indeed, the whole of southern Africa as suggested, interestingly, by Parkington (1984) himself over 20 years ago. The suggested use of broad Australian Aboriginal analogues notwithstanding, I should like to conclude with some words from Mithen (2004:358): "Archaeologists must not be tempted by the present; they must keep returning to the analysis of artefacts and the pursuit of excavation. There are no short cuts to the prehistoric past". It is as well to heed this advice as we grapple with the LSA archaeological record.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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