

Bushmen and Gemsbok

Written by Stefano

Thursday, 22 January 2009 15:09



In one of Sir Laurens van der Post's famed desert stories he recalls the ritual that the first time San Bushmen hunter has to go through in order to get his name among his peers. And I mean literally get his name; most young men are referred to as just John or Pete or whatever in the San language until they complete their first hunt.

To illustrate the linguistic constraints of the San language some youngsters are called !Xu or Regopstaan X!U. Try pronouncing that by pressing your tongue against the back of your palate and imagine you are about to bite into an unripe olive, once the mind is ready you just let the air pop out at any orifice that will let the sound pass. Now that is roughly how it should sound!

The young hunter is tasked to venture into the semi-arid landscape and hunt the majestic eland, for the eland alone has the capability of feeding the whole clan. Armed with bow and (poison) arrows he would creep along the tall clumps of elephant grass, get as close as possible and aim for the flank of the biggest cow. The cow holds more favor as she leads the herd.

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Once the poisoned arrow has hit the mark, and the cow has given her last bellow, the young man will walk up to the animal and praise her for the gift of life that she has given. He will then take out the eye so that her spirit will guide him from here onwards, and he would then swallow the eye, making sure that it does not burst or that he bites the eye. Hence, you will find in the olden days a fair amount of hunters being called Eland, or the San generic thereof, as nearly every hunter wanted to shoot an eland.



If you have doubts about my description, just grab the Geographica Britannica and confirm my story by looking at the rock art sketches. I hope that I have adequately described the situation, or at least done the ritual some justice, as I am about to venture into my own rather uninspiring, at least from a San perspective, story of hunting in the Kalahari.

I was invited to hunt on a game farm on the border of the Kgalagadi/Kalahari Transfrontier

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National Park. The park covers an area as big as the states of Maine and Vermont combined. The Western edge of the park is not fenced and animals migrate from the lower water basins of the Nossop River into the winter grazing areas of the Kalahari sand dunes. Large numbers of eland, springbuck, red hartebeest, ostrich and gemsbok are to be found.

I have my heart set on a gemsbok and was quite keen to try my new 7x57 Africa Mauser. For those in the know, the 7x57 Mauser is one of the finest flat trajectory rifles around. At a distance of 200-300 meters it has no equal (at least in my opinion).

By the way, I should mention that I am writing this article in my second language, Afrikaans being my mother tongue, so I hope that you will excuse any potential grammatical or verb tense errors that could have crept into the article. But enough of that, on with the story.

I arrived fresh and bushy tailed, despite the rather long journey by road. We South Africans enjoy long road trips, but I noticed there was also a small landing strip on the farm. The owner mentioned that American hunters often prefer to fly in and, with the strong dollar vs. rand exchange rate, hiring a plane is not so expensive. Dollar envy is a serious pastime in South Africa at the moment.

Well, at least I had arrived. We sighted our rifles and I was given a guide to accompany me on the first day. Jonas was a man of the Kalahari and he was from the Regopstaan clan. The word Regopstaan means to stand tall and is derived from Afrikaans. It is a bit of a derogatory term as the San Bushmen are by nature extremely small framed, but I believe it was given in good faith as the Regopstaan clan were viewed as the finest trackers in the area and they stood tall as hunters.

Jonas greeted me and asked me what I was hoping to shoot. I mentioned Gemsbok and he said that we would have success as he can see that I am a young man and that the Gemsbok will not be able to run away from us. I believe that my 34-year-old body was in a fair shape, but I was wondering about Jonas. In response to a question about his age, Jonas indicated that he has spent 61 years in this area, but he was not sure about his age, as they did not really keep track of birthdays. It could be more.

Well, the young man and the not so young man decided to try a ridge about two miles from the

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farmstead and we set off at a brisk pace in the direction of the dunes. I was wearing my hunting jacket and a pair of shorts and my thick-soled hunting boots. It was winter, but the climate is moderate with cool mornings and warm afternoons. Jonas was a sight to behold. He wore a loincloth, was barefoot and carried only a small bag, which held an orange and a skinning knife. I felt like Sir Ryder Haggard, exploring the dunes with my trusty companion.

It did not take long before we spotted the first herd. There were two bulls and five cows in the group. I hinted in hushed tone to Jonas that I was ready to try a stalk, but instead of whispering back he replied in a clear voice that we would not get close enough. The herd had moved under the shade of a camel-thorn tree and above the herd was two "kwevoels." These noisy birds are also sometimes referred to us go-away birds and they act as the eyes of the herds. They were bound to see us long before we could get within shooting distance.

Jonas had spotted them first, and was highly amused by my innocence. We decided to leave the herd alone and turned into the wind trying to find another group. Jonas's eyes were accustomed to the veld and he showed me the telltale signs of a herd that contained a large number of adults. He did not seem to find the telltale signs of the lions following the herd interesting! Now I don't know about you, but I was not at ease. Only the foolish will intentionally confront a lion, and I do not usually describe myself as foolish.

Jonas was concerned that the herd might have picked-up the scent of the lions and moved off beyond our hunting area. He told me to wait under the trees while he searched the dunes. He went running over the dunes and I waited for what seemed like an eternity. Thoughts of the lions would not go away, no matter how hard I tried to think of my family and my wife, etc.

Jonas eventually returned and indicated that he had found the herd. We would have to take a short run. I was in favor of a short run, but there is my Western concept of a short run and then there was the Kalahari version of a short run. I was knackered and out for the count after 10 minutes and what seemed like a mile. Jonas, bless his 61-year-old soul, was as fresh as a bloody daisy! I was cursing away, but he insisted that I am a young man and that I should have the stamina of the eland; you see there is the reference to the eland again.

We finally did catch up to the herd and I had to sit down for at least 5 minutes just to steady my legs and regain my breath. Jonas wanted me to get closer, and that meant a crawl on hands and knees for at least 30 meters. Eventually a shot presented itself. The Gemsbok has a large lung/heart area and shot placement is easy. They rely on their keen eyesight and hearing to

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detect predators, and their scimitar shaped horns to defend themselves. Their cooling system is in their head, where a large number of veins run through the nasal passage to cool them off. A lung shot nearly always results in pinkish foam at the mouth.

I fired my shot and the cow went down, only to jump up again. I was bitterly disappointed when I saw her heading over the dune. My disappointment grew more profound when I turned around to find Jonas munching away at his orange. "What now?" I asked. His expression of enjoyment turned to bemusement at my ignorance of hunting in the dunes. His response was that he had to eat the orange since he would need all of his energy to skin the cow. "But she has disappeared among the dunes," I responded. He just nodded his head and indicated that she went to the other side of the dune because that is where the sun is hotter; she knew that she was dying and she wanted to make it difficult for us to skin her.

He was right. We found her on the slope side of the dune. The shot was in the lung and the bullet placement was sufficient for a clean kill. I dreaded the work to cape out the cow that was ahead us, but in the hands of the San Bushmen the trophy was prepared within the hour. Jonas asked if he could have the heart and the eyes, and I gave him the liver as well.

Later that afternoon, while we were relaxing with a cold beer, the owner of the farm told me of the high regard in which he holds his guides. He mentioned that Jonas was his senior guide and that he only works for a month or so each year on the farm. The rest of the year he disappears into the Botswana hinterland to be with his clan. He also mentioned that Jonas always picks his clients first and that it is normally the young guys because he can outrun them all, no matter the age.

I enjoyed the experience and it was a hunt with a difference, but any hunt is normally a hunt with a difference. I have not yet been back to the Kalahari, but I will go again. I might meet up with Jonas again, but then I may not.

All I know is that we are blessed in this country and in this region to have not only a wide diversity of animal species, but also a rich cultural diversity. The San Bushmen are a dying breed, as the young people no longer stay in their tribal areas. The bright lights of the city draw them away, and alcoholism has had a serious impact on their numbers. I only now realise what a privilege it was to hunt with one of the true masters of this noble and ethical sport.

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Article written by Leon Viljoen. Compliments of [Chuck Hawks](#)