**Make a summary**

Use the Information from Peter Magubane’s book *Vanishing Cultures of South Africa* to make an Info summary card (maximum one page) about the San culture. Topics should include the following:

- Origin
- Political and social structure (including position of the women)
- Music & dance
- Arts and crafts
- Religion
- Rock art

Use the techniques as outlined in the ‘Basics of Guiding’ for example underlining and sifting for the relevance / importance of information. Select interesting facts as opposed to just noting information.

After completing the assignment click on the test [REA-110 LU4 ACT2 Make a summary](#).

You don’t need to memorise this information for the written knowledge questionnaires.

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VANISHING CULTURE
of South Africa

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PETER MAGUBANE
JOHANNESBURG, 1998

FRONT COVER: A male Xhosa initiate in the initiation lodge where they are secluded.
BACK COVER: An Ndebele woman wearing the older, permanent neck ring.
COVER SPINE: An example of the beadwork worn at the Zulu Reed Ceremony.
PAGE 1: A female Basotho initiate.
PAGES 2 AND 3: Male Ntwana initiates bow their heads as a sign of deference.
The San

Ancestors of San-speakers were probably the earliest inhabitants of southern Africa, with archaeological sites dating back hundreds of thousands of years. Sites from the last 10,000 years of the Later Stone Age contain artefacts and evidence for practices and ways of life which link them to historical and 20th-century San. Whether these ancestors were also ‘San’ is unknown, as the word describes people speaking ‘click’ languages within the Khoisan language group, and sites do not reveal languages.

The ancestors of the San lived mainly by gathering plants, hunting larger animals and trapping smaller game. At the coast, people also relied on food from the sea (fish, shellfish and marine animals). They had no permanent settlements and travelled about the landscape according to their needs. Some 2,000 years ago, Khoekhoe people (herders who moved around with their sheep and cattle) and Iron Age farmers (who had livestock and cultivated crops, thus necessitating permanent settlements) migrated southwards into South Africa. From the Khoekhoe, to whom they were genetically and linguistically linked, San ancestors acquired the art of making pottery. Although they did not adopt the technology for making metal possessed by Iron Age farmers, metal artefacts in Later Stone Age sites show that there was also contact between hunter-gatherers and farmers. It seems that these peoples with different economies co-existed although, in pressurized colonial times, conflicts were recorded (for example, in the Drakensberg, where the San became experts at stealing cattle and horses from both black farmers and colonists). The demise of the southern San as a distinct cultural and economic group is perhaps due to the last few hundred years, and the impact of colonialism from the 17th century onward: San-speakers were enslaved, and in some instances exterminated en masse. Many others became labourers in and around colonial settlements and farms, which resulted in the destruction of the traditional identities of the southern San by the beginning of this century.

A belief that was prevalent for many years was that the San in the Kalahari Desert of Botswana and Namibia were descendants of fugitive people driven from better-watered parts of southern Africa. In fact, archaeological evidence reveals that the Kalahari has been occupied by hunter-gatherers for millennia. These peoples have been extensively studied by anthropologists and archaeologists, seeking parallels between modern hunter-gatherers and their ancestors. The San, however, are not ‘living fossils’: like any other people they change with circumstances. Kalahari hunter-gatherers today retain many aspects of ancient lifestyles, but are not isolated from the modern world and the money economy. Often marginalized, even today, they have adopted many strategies for economic, cultural and political survival. For example, nowadays they may keep domestic animals (such as goats, donkeys and cattle) and have adopted aspects of a pastoralist (herding) way of life. The persistence of the San undoubtedly owes much to their rich and long-standing cultural traditions, which have helped them carve a niche in the arid Kalahari, with its minimal rainfall and extremes of temperature.

Ways of Life

At different times and places, San-speakers have lived in various ways; the Kalahari San are not necessary typical of all San and, even in the Kalahari groups, lifestyles may differ. Nevertheless, studies of Kalahari groups, for instance the Ju‘hoansi and the G/wi, create a general picture of the hunter-gatherer life. A division of labour between men and women is central to the economy. Plant foods are the dietary staple, and women, the chief gatherers, have expert knowledge of the veld: they know when and where resources such as melons, tubers, corms and berries are to be found. Women also collect or snare small fauna (such as reptiles, birds and small antelope). While out collecting, they

Top: Tobacco has long been an important and desirable trade commodity, and smoking is enjoyed by both men and women. Opposite: A man plays the ‘musical bow’ or ‘mouth bow’, which was probably the forerunner of all string instruments. The mouth of the player serves as the resonator. Men may improvise tunes during their leisure time in the camp, or while they are walking in search of game.
A traditional dance, similar to the curing dance, where women clap and sing songs while men dance in a circle in a forward-bending posture. Anyone, even the very young, may participate. Here, the slaughter of a goat contributes to the celebration. Opposite: The San successfully blend the old with the new: donkey-drawn carts may be made from parts of derelict vehicles; some people wear traditional clothing, but others have adopted a more Western dress style.

may observe the movements of the game and relay this information to the hunters. Men may gather food too, especially in the low hunting season. Gathered foods are distributed among the gatherer’s family, while the larger game hunted by men is distributed among the whole group. The formidable reputation of the San as expert hunters is due to their outstanding tracking abilities and their ingenious hunting techniques. San trackers can follow spoor across virtually every land surface, even pursuing a wounded antelope among the spoor of a whole herd, until it finally leaves the herd and dies. Hunters use bows and arrows tipped with poison (derived from beetles or snakes) which does not contaminate the meat. However, it usually takes time before the poison works, allowing the dying animal to flee from its attackers, sometimes over considerable distances, making skilled tracking essential.

San arrows are clever instruments of death. Today, as in earlier times, they consist of four components. The point used to be made of bone or small skilfully flaked stones; today flattened nails or pieces of wire are used. The point is fitted into the ‘link’, which is tapered at either end and held in place by a reed collar. The link is fitted to the shaft in such a way that, when the arrow strikes its target, the impact breaks the link free from the shaft, reducing the likelihood of the head working loose, as there is less weight hanging from it. This also means that the animal cannot easily dislodge the point by rubbing against a tree. The poison is applied just behind the point, and the arrowhead has to stay in the animal for some time to ensure that the poison is adequately absorbed into the animal’s system. The man who owns the arrow that killed the animal has the privilege of distributing the meat, according to rules of kinship, ensuring that everyone receives a portion. Sharing and the relative equality of all group members are important features of San societies. Though San groups did not have political chiefs, leadership was certainly recognized, according to seniority and ability. In traditional San societies, the husband went to live with the bride’s parents on marriage. There were many rules of respect to be observed between the couple and their respective in-laws, whereas those separated by a generation (such as grandparents and grandchildren) were permitted a ‘joking relationship’, in which less formal conduct was appropriate. The San are known for their marked fondness for and indulgent attitude to children.

Typically, the group would split into smaller family units seasonally (usually when water and food were at their most sparse and dispersed), re-uniting at a later stage. Formalized gift giving, called pharm taro by the Ju’hoansi, is a way of maintaining reciprocal relationships between friends and relatives both in and beyond the group. This creates a web of support and access to resources over large areas. The importance of San kinship systems is echoed in religious beliefs, in myths and stories, and, obliquely, in the rock art.

**Religion and Belief**

There is a great variety of beliefs among and even within different San groups, but there is also much held in common, even between vastly separated areas. In the late 19th century, a !Xam (Northern Cape San) man and another from Lesotho independently described their belief in a being named /Kaggen or Cagn. Kaggen was a combined trickster and creator – powerful and sometimes benevolent, but capable of mischievous, malicious and stupid deeds. He was thought to have created the eland, the animal which appears most frequently in South African rock paintings. The Kalahari San have a similar trickster figure in their narrative traditions. The Ju’hoansi described a great and a lesser god, the former associated with life and the rising sun, the latter with death and the west. A belief which was apparently ubiquitously held was that, when the world was first created, animals were indistinguishable from humans, and many human pursuits of a spiritual nature are variations upon this theme.
from the first people. These people had not yet acquired culture and manners. Only after a second creation were people and the animals separated, and people learnt how to observe a social code. Certain myths and stories, probably of great antiquity, are also very widely told.

Beliefs about death are less uniform. In the late 19th century, the same /Xam man explained that at death a person's heart went into the sky, where it became a star. Among recent Kalahari San too, a shooting star was associated with a person's death. Another southern San man described how a person's spirit or ghost walked from the grave to a 'great hole' underground, where dead people and animals lived. Most Kalahari groups seem to believe that the dead go to the great god's house in the sky. Northern and southern San believed that, even after death, people were capable of influencing the living. /Xam narrators described how people would speak to the dead to ask for help in hunting or bringing the rain. When shamans (healers) died, they were greatly feared and thought to be a particular danger to the living.

The ritual dances of the Kalahari San, where shamans enter a trance in order to cure the sick, are well known. A fire is lit, women start to clap and sing powerful medicine songs, and a dance which lasts all night begins. People initiated into the healing skills (both sexes) may go into a trance as a result of the rhythmic movement and music. It is believed that they have access to the lesser god who causes illness, and hence the ability to counteract the 'arrows of sickness' which he shoots into people. Trancers draw on a supernatural potency (num), believed to reside in various substances, including the sweat produced by the shaman's exertions. Another supernatural potency (nlow) is linked to beliefs about birth, death and gender, and rain and weather. All humans and large herbivores possess nlow. Humans acquire good

**OPPOSITE:** The San are known for their fondness for, and indulgent attitudes towards, children. These people migrated from the inner reaches of the Kalahari to their seasonal camp site in the semi-desert. **BELOW:** The preparation and working of animal products are performed by men. From animals the San derive food, bone for artefacts, and leather for clothing. In the past, and still today, clothing was adorned with ostrich eggshell beads and buttons, but these days modern materials may be used. The decorations on this man's apron are reminiscent of the rock engravings with which the San are associated.
(rain-bringing) or bad (dry) ntlow at birth, and it is activated again at death. Rain-making was an important part of southern San religious belief and ritual. The Xam of the Northern Cape (whose language and cultural unity no longer exist) described ‘rain sorcerers’, as well as ‘game sorcerers’ and ‘sorcerers of illness’ (healers). The religious beliefs known from many diverse San groups are currently thought to be crucial to understanding the rock art of southern Africa.

TREASURES OF THE CAVES

The spectacular paintings that the ancestors of the San left on the rocks and the walls of cave and shelter are arguably the most exquisite and finely detailed in the world’s hunter-gatherer art. Equally skilled engravings (petroglyphs) are found principally in the interior of the country, but paintings occur more extensively, especially in rocky or mountainous areas such as the Drakensberg (KwaZulu-Natal), the Eastern Cape, and the south-western Cape (including the Cedarberg). Human figures and large antelope are by far most commonly depicted, and features of the landscape are rarely included. For unknown reasons, the engravings include more abstract designs than the paintings. Initially, many people thought that the art merely illustrated scenes from daily lives, or records of hunting, although the idea that the art was linked to religion and mythology was present from the start. The artistic tradition had died out by this century, and even earlier in some parts of the country.

The colours used by the San in their art were principally reds, from orange to brown and maroon; yellow; black and white; and their derivatives. Neither blue nor green was ever used. Sophisticated chemical techniques are needed to investigate the composition of the pigments, and many questions remain to be answered. Red pigments were obtained from haematite (red ochre) and yellows from limonite (yellow ochre). Manganese oxide and occasionally charcoal were used for black paints, while white pigment, which does not preserve well, may have been made from kaolin or bird droppings. In the 1930s, an old part-San man, who had observed San painters, demonstrated the process as he remembered it, and stated that he needed eland blood to mix with the pigment – undoubtedly a symbolic and magical ingredient.

Dating the rock art is extremely difficult. It cannot usually be carbon dated, because the pigments are inorganic (i.e. contain no carbon) and because the quantities of organic elements used are too small to test. If flakes of painted rock are found in archaeological deposits, organic material in the same layer can be dated, giving an approximate age. One Namibian site has yielded dates of over 26,000 years for slabs of rock with black pigment on them, but all other dates fall within the last 10,000 years. Most of the paintings still visible on the rock face are probably even younger, since the paint and rock surfaces are vulnerable to deterioration and decay. Drakensberg paintings of horses and soldiers indicate that these paintings cannot pre-date the 19th century.

A striking feature of San art is the stylized wide-striding human figures, which vividly depict action and speed. Action is shown in many different ways: dramatically, by animals galloping or leaping, and subtly.

Below: Rock paintings at the Stadsaal Caves (Cedarberg) are typical of the south-western Cape mountains. Rows of human figures are a feature of this area. Elephants are also often painted in this region, unlike the Drakensberg, where they are rarely portrayed.
by the flick of the tail or the twist of a neck. Sometimes the paintings create a sense of tension by capturing the moment just prior to action, such as an archer about to unleash his arrows, or a lion about to leap. Like other aspects of San life and culture, there is enormous variation and range, in style, subject matter, and so forth, alongside similarities which suggest that they were inspired by similar religious beliefs. The fine bichrome (two colours) and polychrome (more than two colours) paintings of eland, an animal of great symbolic significance to the southern San, are one pointer to the religious affiliation of some, perhaps most, of the art. Paintings of dances, where women clap while men dance, also link some of the art to ritual healing, as known from the Kalahari San. Paintings of soldiers, wagons, and similar imagery may have been partly magical in function, but also record historical events – including those which led ultimately to the termination of the painting tradition, and the San hunter-gatherer way of life in South Africa.

**Above:** The unity of San family groups can be seen in this touching portrait of a mother and son. **Page 164, top:** Hunter-gatherers, since they move in search of natural resources, do not make permanent structures. Branches and grasses form windbreaks (skerms), which are commonly erected in a roughly circular arrangement, around a central hearth. When the group moves on, the shelter is left to disintegrate. **Page 164, bottom:** The elderly are highly respected and cared for, but traditionally an old person, who was unable to keep up with a band that was on the move, might be left behind in the veld with food and water; if a new camp site were soon found, he or she would be fetched. Necessity dictated that the ailing be left to their fate, rather than threaten the survival of the entire group. **Page 165:** Children and grandparents have a close bond, and enjoy an informal relationship that is not permitted between parents and their children, or a couple and their in-laws.