Re-tribe and Resist: The Ethnogenesis of a Creolised Raiding Band in Response to Colonisation

Sam Challis

“Bushmen” are often thought of as smaller in stature and paler of skin than southern African pastoralists and agropastoralists, yet this is a stereotype of the San partly perpetuated by the popular media and partly by the colonial tendency to classify according to appearance. The surviving San of the Kalahari have become the model for San throughout the subcontinent. In the nineteenth century, words such as ‘Bushmen’, ‘San’, ‘BaTwa’ and ‘BaKwe’ were used to denote economy, not only race. If one was perceived to be a hunter-gatherer, one was ‘Bushman’. Some ‘Bushman’ groups designated themselves as such, even though they practised stock-keeping, were from heterogeneous backgrounds and held heterodox beliefs. There were advantages to being ‘Bushman’ on a destabilised frontier, which meant that peoples of differing cultural backgrounds sometimes banded together and actively created new ‘Bushman’ identities that met their needs: cohesion, subsistence and protection – centring on the practice of raiding. In one particular instance this was done in such a way that the group survives in the paintings they made of themselves with horses, cattle, dogs and muskets in the rock shelters from where they raided their neighbours.

An intermittent threat in the side of the trekker and colonial administrators of nineteenth-century Natal was the threat of stock theft by ‘Bushman’ raiders from the Malori Drakensberg. Quite who these so-called ‘Bushmen’ were was not, in general, of particular import to the colonists. A ‘Bushman’ was a ‘Bushman’, but by the middle of the century, when several depopulations had been sent to both the ‘Bushmen’ and the African farmers known to have contact with them, it transpired in various hearings that the ‘Bushmen’ comprised several distinct groups. When I use the term ‘distinct’, I mean that