

SANS OF TIME

— **Compiled by Eugene Yiga** —

Although photographer Paul Weinberg studied the San peoples at university, nothing could have prepared him for what he saw when he first encountered them in 1984

TRACES AND TRACKS

The easy and prevailing cliché that depressingly remains in vogue is that the San are beautiful, small people; children of nature who hunt and gather and live a harmonious existence untouched by history. Book after book and film after film continues to portray this myth and misrepresentation. When reality defies it, the scene is simply deconstructed, as if in a movie. It's an industry in itself and, as the late American anthropologist John K Marshall called it, "death by myth".

For three decades, I travelled to communities in Namibia, Botswana and SA to document the lives of the modern San. In 2013 and 2014,

with the support of the !Khwatla San Culture Centre in the Western Cape, I embarked on visits to communities I'd last encountered 30 years previously. In these trips, I reconnected with many people I'd known and acquainted myself with new voices in these landscapes.

Traces and Tracks, a compilation of my San journeys, is an exhibition of 100 images with video installations. Together with Joe Weinberg, we recorded over 20 interviews, which are part of the exhibition under the title *San Voices*. I also ran workshops for young, emergent San storytellers, whose insights and perspectives are included in this exhibition.



GALLERY

My collective journeys, which began in the last quarter of the 20th century, have been aimed at understanding and documenting the conundrum between these peace-loving communities and the challenges they face in a modern, fast-changing world.

Opposite: I count myself deeply privileged to have observed, (at times) lived with and celebrated one of the oldest cultures on the planet. I've learnt enormously from the communities who've shared their lives with me.



The San represent a range of intrinsic values of humankind. Their encyclopaedic knowledge of their environment, their culture and their cosmic value system resonate deeply in the African and universal consciousness.





While today there are an estimated 113 000 San who live in southern Africa – predominantly in Namibia, Botswana and, to a lesser extent, SA – their one-time harmonious relationship with nature and the environment has been under serious threat since they interacted with other settlers.

Above: I've engaged with communities represented by individuals who've shared their lives and stories with me, rather than attempting to speak on behalf of the generic whole.





Above: Struggles and challenges vary in a myriad of ways throughout southern Africa. Over the past 30 years, my work has sought to counter the essentialised, mythologised view of the San.

Opposite: Waves of settlers (both black and white), heightened competition for land, insensitive ideologies, greed, wars and short-sighted environmental and ecological policies have all contributed to the precarious existence of the San.

About the photographer

Long before I knew my real passion in photography was storytelling, I was practising it. As a young photographer, I would walk the streets of Johannesburg, spend time talking to people I didn't know, cross the divides that kept us apart, visit townships and explore city life, the bush and all that lay in between. They were seldom assignments, but rather trips that were triggered by questions I was asking myself, driven by a fascination for the world around me. They were often loose personal encounters: bus rides, train trips, hitch-hiking adventures. Mostly they were moments that captured a variety of fleeting experiences. Over



the years, these moments connected with others and began telling a visual story of experiences, broader narratives and interactions.

When I began taking photographs, it was in the context of a land divided. I now live in a country ostensibly united. Politically, at least, we've come full circle. These photographs capture glimpses of life between the cracks before, during and after the turning of the political wheel. They're about how people try to survive in many different and extraordinary ways and the survival choices they make, often under extreme conditions of hardship. They're also about how I, as a photographer, have interacted with these situations, the subconscious choices I made at particular moments and the resulting stories that emerged through my camera lens.

Closely allied to storytelling is my love for travel. I've always loved travelling and still do. Packing my bags for a trip, or speeding to the airport to catch a flight, I feel happy deep inside. It's the fleeting impression of things that ignites the creative spark before the shutter goes; the flicker that "gets there" long before the physical response. It's the imaginative trigger that reacts instantaneously to the promise of the moment and energises the camera frame long before my finger touches the button. 🌈

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Traces and Tracks is at the !Khwattu Gallery until 30 June 2016. Grootwater Farm, R27, Yzerfontein, Western Cape – about an hour's drive from Cape Town. Tel: 022 492 2998. To keep updated about other venues across the country, visit: www.khwattu.org

