

Stolen Childhoods: Cape San Child Captives and the Raising of Colonial Subjects in the Nineteenth-Century Cape Colony

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Abstract

Histories of indigenous child captives in settler-colonies remain marginal amid broader inquiries into colonial-era genocides of indigenous peoples. Yet, child transfers played an integral role in the demise of indigenous populations in numerous settler-colonies. Forced child removals occurred alongside the physical annihilation of parent societies and was often an important part of the erosion and eradication of hunter-gatherer peoples and identities. This article aims to set out an analysis of the integral role played by child abductions and transfers in the genocide of the Cape San during the early nineteenth century, with a particular focus on civilian initiative. In the Cape Colony, civilians initiated the practice of capturing and transferring San children to their invasive settler society. San children were considered malleable and better disposed to forced assimilation as labourers. Apprenticeship legislation was eventually introduced in the Cape Colony to regulate indigenous child transfers and to ensure that its worst abuses were minimised, although these ideals were seldom realised. Apprenticeship legislation attempted to catch up with existing practice set in motion by civilians and in effect, colonial authorities played an enabling role by legally legitimising it. The analysis also explores the narrative justifications for San child abduction and transfer employed by European-descended settlers, and contrasts these with contemporary evangelical-humanitarian discourses. Settlers and missionaries adopted different means to incorporate San children into settler society, while agreeing that incorporation was the desired end. Discursively, settlers and missionaries managed to frame their actions as being in the best interests of San children.

Keywords: San; Cape Colony; nineteenth century; child captives; childhood; genocide; forced labour; settler colonialism.

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How to cite this article: J. McDonald, 'Stolen childhoods: Cape San child captives and the raising of colonial subjects in the nineteenth-century Cape Colony', *Historia* 68, 2, November 2023, 3-23.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-8392/2023/v68n2a1>

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Opsomming

Die geskiedenis van inheemse kindergevangenes in setlaarskolonies bly steeds 'n verwaarloosde kategorie binne wyer ondersoek na die volksmoord op inheemse gemeenskappe tydens die koloniale era. Tog het die oordrag van kinders 'n sleutelrol gespeel in die aftakeling van inheemse gemeenskappe binne vele setlaarskolonies. Die gedwonge verskuiwing van kinders het die fisieke uitwissing van ouergemeenskappe vergesel en het dikwels 'n belangrike deel uitgemaak van die erodering en vernietiging van jagter-versamelaar samelewings en hul identiteit. Hierdie artikel is daarop gemik om 'n ontleding te verskaf van die integrale rol van kinderontvoering en -oordrag in die volksmoord van die Kaapse San in die vroeë 19de eeu, met 'n bepaalde fokus op burgerlike inisiatief. In die Kaapkolonie het burgerlikes die gebruik om San kinders gevange te neem en na die indringer-setlaarsgemeenskap oor te dra, geïnisieer. San kinders is beskou as plooibaar en makliker om as gedwonge arbeiders te assimileer. Inboekeling-wetgewing is in die Kaapkolonie ingestel om inheemse kinder-oordrag te reguleer en die ergste vergrype te beperk, alhoewel hierdie ideale selde verwesenlik is. Inboekeling-wetgewing het probeer byhou met 'n bestaande praktyk wat deur burgerlikes van stapel gestuur is, met die gevolg dat die koloniale owerhede inderwaarheid die praktyk bevorder het deur dit te legitimeer. Die ontleding doen ook ondersoek na die narratiewe regverdiging vir die ontvoering en oordrag van San kinders deur setlaars van Europese afkoms, en kontrasteer dit met eietydse evangelies-humanitêre diskoerse. Setlaars en sendelinge het verskillende benaderings gehad tot die opneem van San kinders in die setlaarsgemeenskap, maar beide het saamgestem dat dit die gewenste uitkoms is. In hul diskoers het setlaars sowel as sendelinge daarin geslaag om hul optrede uit te beeld as in die beste belang van die San kinders.

Sleutelwoorde: San; Kaapkolonie; negentiende eeu; kindergevangenes; kinders; kinderjare; volksmoord; gedwonge arbeid; setlaar-kolonialisme.

Introduction

Apart from the Australian experience, forced child removals remain under researched in histories of colonial-era genocides of indigenous peoples, even though the forcible transfer of children from their natal communities is recognised as an act of genocide.¹ Child confiscations played a significant role in the demise of indigenous and hunter-gatherer populations in numerous settler-colonial locales during the nineteenth century, from Queensland to California and the Cape Colony.² This article explores

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1. See the acts defined as genocide in Article II of the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.
 2. The label 'child' is loosely defined in this article, as necessitated by the idiosyncrasies of the meaning of the term and its application in the nineteenth-century Cape Colony.

the practice of Cape San child confiscations during the early nineteenth century in the Cape Colony.³ It investigates how this practice was initiated and driven by civilians, who regarded Cape San children as pliable and conducive to assimilation as forced labourers.⁴ Given its history of sustained European settlement since the mid-seventeenth century, the Cape Colony was the site of one of the earliest episodes of indigenous child transfers during the age of European imperialism and settler colonialism.⁵ Ideological justifications for Cape San child confiscations along with

The modern definition of a child as anyone under the age of 18 is helpful, however, as a reading of early nineteenth century legislation pertaining to children shows, other ages were also regarded as significant – especially as they related to an individual's ability for labour and productivity. Apprenticeship laws in the Cape Colony highlighted the ages of 10, 12 and 16, and specified different ages for boys and girls. The notion of children (and youth) is further complicated in colonial contexts and slave-based economies, as colonised and enslaved individuals were often infantilised well into what would be regarded as adulthood today. For the purposes of this paper, 'children' are regarded as individuals who were of a young age – by the standards of the Cape colonial context – and were typically below the age of 16, though there was a clear preference on the part of frontier farmers for child labourers much younger.

3. The terms Cape San and San are used interchangeably. These labels refer to the Cape's indigenous hunter-gatherers and are preferred to the contemporary term 'Bushmen' (and other variations) given the derogatory undertones. It is recognised that the social category designated as San or Cape San was not stable during the early nineteenth century and observations by missionaries, travellers, government officials, and other observers are unreliable. The primary marker of social belonging for the Cape Colony's indigenous peoples was typically subsistence mode. The tendency on the part of the academe has been to equate hunter-gatherers with San and pastoralists with Khoe. However, as both Shula Marks and Richard Elphick have argued, hunter-gatherers and pastoralists may have been on different stages of an economic cycle. Hunter-gatherers could acquire livestock and seem to be herders, while herders could lose their livestock and depend on hunting and gathering. Both subsistence modes could also co-exist. Nonetheless, this paper adopts the position that there were distinctive socio-cultural, indigenous groups in the Cape Colony and its colonial frontier zones, and that these groups were characterised by markers other than subsistence mode (such as cosmology, language, and cultural practices). See S. Marks, 'Khoisan Resistance to the Dutch in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *Journal of African History*, 13, 1 (1972), 55-80; and R. Elphick, *Kraal and Castle: Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).
4. The neglected role of civilian-driven violence in genocidal processes against indigenous peoples has gained fresh insights through a recent collection of essays, drawing on case studies from Australia, the Americas, and southern Africa. See A. Adhikari (ed.), *Civilian Driven Violence and the Genocide of Indigenous Peoples in Settler Societies* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2020).
5. For helpful comparative analyses of the Australian context, see S. Robinson and J. Paten, 'The Question of Genocide and Indigenous Child Removal: The Colonial Australian Context', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 10, 4 (2008), 501-518; P. Hetherington, *Settlers, Servants and Slaves: Aboriginal and European Children in Nineteenth Century Western Australia* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2002); and A. Haebich, *Broken Circles: Fragmenting Indigenous Families, 1800-2000* (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre, 2000).

their resulting methods of transfer would come to bear striking similarities with subsequent settler colonial sites of indigenous child transfer.

Following the Second British Occupation of the Cape Colony in 1806, the British colonial government intervened to regulate Cape San child confiscations by introducing legislation that facilitated their legal indenture in line with the colonial state's humanitarian imperatives. The civilian role in perpetrating genocide in settler-colonial contexts has only recently gained scholarly attention.⁶ Adhikari's work has been pathbreaking, supported by Van Sittert and Rousset's research on the extermination and enslavement of San in Graaff-Reinet district during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁷ The related scholarship – which is still engaging with the relevance and legitimacy of genocide as a conceptual lens – builds upon earlier, pioneering research into the colonisation of the Cape's northern and north-eastern frontiers, and in turn, the San.⁸ In addition to his earlier, seminal work on the fate of the San, Penn has also interrogated the attitudes of the British colonial administration towards the San in the 1820s and 1830s. These attitudes were influenced by key figures in the evangelical-humanitarian campaign, such as the prominent superintendent of the London Missionary Society, John Philip.⁹ Though prone to exaggeration, Philip nonetheless raised awareness about the plight of the San and drew metropolitan attention to what he regarded as orchestrated efforts to exterminate them.¹⁰

This article contends that child confiscation was one of the crucial ways in which genocide was perpetrated against Cape San and argues that civilians were the leading agents of this form of social and cultural destruction in the Cape Colony. This analysis considers a civilian as anyone who is not a member of a formal military force.

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6. For example, M. Adhikari, *The Anatomy of a South African Genocide: The Extermination of the Cape San Peoples* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2010); M. Adhikari, "The Bushman is a Wild Animal to be Shot at Sight": Annihilation of the Cape Colony's Foraging Societies by Stock-Farming Settlers in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in *Genocide on Settler Frontiers: When Hunter-Gatherers and Commercial Stock Farmers Clash*, ed. M. Adhikari (Cape Town: UCT Press, 2014).
 7. L. van Sittert and T. Rousset, 'An Unbroken Line and Crimes and Blood: Settler Militia and the Extermination and Enslavement of San in the Graaff-Reinet District of the Cape Colony, c. 1776-1825', in Adhikari, *Civilian Driven Violence*, 86-113.
 8. Notably N. Penn, *The Forgotten Frontier: Colonist and Khoisan on the Cape's Northern Frontier in the 18th Century* (Cape Town: Double Storey Books, 2005); N. Penn, 'Fated to Perish: The Destruction of the Cape San', in P. Skotnes (ed.), *Miscast: Negotiating the Presence of the Bushmen* (Cape Town: UCT Press, 1996), 81-92; and M. Szalay, *The San and the Colonisation of the Cape, 1770-1879: Conflict, Incorporation, Acculturation* (Köln: Rüdiger Köppe, 1995).
 9. For a comprehensive analysis of John Philip's life and career, see T. Keegan, *Dr Philip's Empire: One Man's Struggle for Justice in Nineteenth-Century South Africa* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2016).
 10. N. Penn, 'The British and the "Bushman": The Massacre of the Cape San, 1795 to 1828', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 15, 2 (2013), 183-200.

In doing so, the analysis agrees with a departure point forwarded by Adhikari: that it is overly simplistic ‘to regard squads of settler farmers who for a few days, or a week or two, went on periodic killing sprees’ against San, or other indigenous peoples, as ‘having yielded their civilian status’.¹¹ Such settler-farmers were not dependent on military activity for their livelihood and as such, remained civilian perpetrators, even in frontier contexts that were often quasi-militaristic in nature. Further, the discussion explores the narrative justifications for San child transfer employed by European-descended settlers and contrasts these with contemporary evangelical-humanitarian discourses. Settlers and missionaries adopted different means to incorporate San children into settler society, while agreeing that incorporation was the desired end. Discursively, both settlers and missionaries managed to frame their actions as being in the best interests of San children.

The history of child transfers during the broader extermination of the Cape San highlights several important insights. Perpetrator motives and narratives are brought into sharper focus when analysing the treatment of children as victims of genocide or genocidal acts. The ideological and utilitarian justifications employed by perpetrators when dealing with child victims spotlight genocidal convictions, motives, and doubts, in ways that analyses of whole victim groups may lose sight of. In many settler-colonial contexts during the nineteenth century, the children of victim groups were often caught between the dual imperatives of settler colonial expansion, namely, the eradication of indigenous peoples to settle on captured land, and the need for indigenous labour to enable extractive production of the land. Where these two imperatives ran counter to each other – the extermination of the labour upon which settler colonialism relied – the indenturing of surviving children and youth of the victim group presented an opportunity for achieving both outcomes. Child labour was a taken-for-granted practice in early industrial Britain and Europe, and this thinking was carried to colonial territories and tailored to local contexts.¹² Children were regarded as more prone to adapt to settler-colonial cultures and hierarchies by virtue of being malleable and impressionable.¹³ However, the early nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of notions of childhood that would come to predominate in the Victorian era and beyond.¹⁴ Influenced by humanitarian ideals, children and youth in Britain, and across the nascent empire, were increasingly

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11. M. Adhikari, ‘“No Savage Shall Inherit the Land”: Civilian-driven Violence in the Making of Settler Genocides’, in Adhikari, *Civilian Driven Violence*, 7.
 12. H. Cunningham, *Children and Childhood in Western Society since 1500* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 1995); H. Cunningham, *The Invention of Childhood* (London: BBC Books, 2006).
 13. For early modern perceptions of children as inherently malleable, see L.A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
 14. The ideas in this article have been refined by engagement with Sarah Duff’s *Changing Childhoods in the Cape Colony: Dutch Reformed Church Evangelicalism and Colonial Childhood, 1860-1895* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

seen as a distinct sub-group of society with particular needs.¹⁵ Notions of childhood became more pronounced in the Cape Colony during the 1830s, as Swartz has shown, influenced by humanitarian approaches to labour and education.¹⁶ Humanitarianism and its bedfellow, humanitarian imperialism, were in vogue for much of the 1830s and 1840s, and they shaped metropolitan and colonial attitudes towards indigenous peoples in general, and indigenous children in particular.¹⁷

The abolition of slavery in British colonial territories in 1834, the high point of humanitarian imperialism, was followed by the investigations of the House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines, convened in 1836. The committee's work led to the establishment of the Aborigines' Protection Society the following year.¹⁸ The committee was established to inquire into the steady demise of indigenous peoples across British colonial territories. The report came to some uncomfortable conclusions for imperialists and humanitarian imperialists alike. In short, the committee found that indigenous populations had suffered extensive loss of life and that their means of survival had been seriously curtailed as a result of colonial encroachment, frontier violence and acts that amounted to the eradication of indigenous peoples, whether deliberate or inadvertent.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the dual tides of imperialism and settler colonialism were not to be stemmed in the coming decades. There was a settler backlash to the report of the Select Committee on Aborigines, with many in the Cape Colony opposing its conclusions vehemently, given the negative light it cast on settler treatment of indigenous peoples.²⁰ By mid-century, humanitarian imperialism was in retreat as a guiding philosophy in imperial ambitions as more overtly racist thinking began to shape metropolitan and colonial attitudes towards indigenous peoples.²¹

15. For a compelling comparative study, see V.N. Dadrian, 'Children as Victims of Genocide: The Armenian Case', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 5, 3 (2003), 421-437.

16. R. Swartz, *Education and Empire: Children, Race and Humanitarianism in the British Settler Colonies, 1833-1880* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

17. E. Elbourne, *Blood Ground: Colonialism, Missions, and the Contest for Christianity in the Cape Colony and Britain, 1799-1853* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2002).

18. J. Heartfield, *The Aborigines' Protection Society: Humanitarian Imperialism in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Canada, South Africa, and the Congo, 1836-1909* (London: Hurst & Company, 2011).

19. For example, House of Commons Parliamentary Papers, No. 425, 1837, *Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines*, 25.

20. Heartfield, *The Aborigines' Protection Society*, 7.

21. A. Bank, 'Losing Faith in the Civilising Mission: The Premature Decline of Humanitarian Liberalism at the Cape, 1840-60', in *Empire and Others: British Encounters with Indigenous Peoples, 1600-1850*, eds M. Daunton and R. Halpern (London: UCL Press, 1999), 366; and A. Lester and F. Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance: Protecting Aborigines across the Nineteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Even so, the ideas around childhood that came to the fore in the 1830s continued to influence policy in both metropole and colony. This was most notable in the growing view that government should take a leading role in the provision of education, although a coherent educational policy would remain neglected by the Colonial Office.²² This idea was still in its infancy in Britain at the time, but it would also come to influence attitudes and policies towards children in the colonies, including indigenous children. As Swartz has noted, childhood came to be regarded as a crucial ‘time to make interventions into Indigenous peoples’ lives’.²³ Prior to the 1830s, education for indigenous children in the Cape Colony had fallen exclusively under the purview of missionaries, primarily of the Moravian and London Missionary Societies. Missionary motives typically conflicted with those of the colonial authorities and settlers, who regarded missionary interventions with scepticism and suspicion, believing that the only training of any value for indigenous children was training as labourers.²⁴ Though seemingly contradictory, missionary (humanitarian) intentions towards indigenous children also dovetailed with colonial and settler prerogatives. For they could all claim to be acting in the best interests of indigenous children, protecting them from various threats. Protection was a contingent concept, shaped by the ideological and utilitarian motives of those who deployed it as a justification for their interventions on behalf of indigenous children.

As such, notions of childhood intersected with colonial, settler-colonial and humanitarian viewpoints, ambitions and practices in intriguing ways. Notably, the ideas around education, empire and indigenous children that emerged as predominant in the 1830s had remarkable precursors in the Cape Colony. The plight and fate of indigenous children caught the attention of colonial authorities and evangelical-humanitarians at the Cape some time before the 1830s. It is this earlier history that this article seeks to elucidate. Remarkably, already in the 1810s and even earlier, key actors in the Cape Colony were expressing ideas with regard to desired outcomes for indigenous children, especially those who were caught up in the violence of the north-eastern frontier. Many of the standard markers that came to frame the treatment of indigenous children, both practically and discursively, amidst the settler-colonial genocides to which their parent societies were subjected, were present in the Cape Colony during this period. When applied to indigenous children, childhood evoked sentiments of protection, socialisation, and the imparting of acceptable conduct as colonial subjects. It drew upon the belief in the civilising potential of labour for indigenous children when separated from their families.²⁵ In

22. Swartz, *Education and Empire*, 6.

23. Swartz, *Education and Empire*, 2.

24. This sentiment was also common in the Australian colonial context. See S. Robinson, *Something Like Slavery? Queensland's Aboriginal Child Workers, 1842-1945* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishers, 2008), 3-10.

25. This attitude was also influential in justifying Aboriginal child removals in the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century. See Haebich, *Broken Circles*, 69-77.

this sense, child transfer offered the prospect of redemption from perceived savagery and an act since recognised as genocidal was presented as being in the best interests of the Cape San child. Missionaries, settlers and colonial authorities may have had different views on the preferred means to this end, but the end was not in dispute.

The discussion continues with an analysis of the crucial role played by child confiscations and transfers in the genocide of the Cape San, with a focus on the nineteenth century and early British colonial period. The eradication of the Cape San via violent means and exterminatory acts had received the support and legal sanction of the officials of the *Verenigde Oost-Indisch Compagnie* (VOC) during the eighteenth century. The British, in contrast, favoured a more humane approach to subduing and colonising Cape San, influenced by humanitarian ideas stemming from the antislavery campaign and the growing influence of the missionary movement. Yet, in spite of the best intentions of some colonial officials, settler-perpetrated violence continued to occur along the Cape Colony's north-eastern frontier into the 1820s and 1830s. The British inherited an established pattern of frontier violence that was marked by massacres and the transfer of San survivors, particularly children, to settler society as forced labourers. In keeping with the British colonial desire to impose jurisdictional authority over the Cape Colony and its inhabitants (both settler and indigenous), local authorities introduced legal measures to regulate the procurement and treatment of San children. For settlers, missionaries and colonial officials alike, the San had to change their way of life so as to be less of a hindrance to productive settler colonialism. The ensuing question of what to do about indigenous children acquired as a result of the violence and instability of the north-eastern frontier, reveals valuable insights into the civilian role in the genocide of the Cape San, as well as the justifications employed by these different categories of perpetrator, including those with benign intentions.

Cape San child abductions and transfers in the early nineteenth century

The British colonial administration inherited a volatile north-eastern frontier. The eastern frontier may have presented the most serious threat to the territorial integrity of the Cape Colony – notably during the Third Frontier War between the Cape Colony and the Xhosa chieftaincies, and the concomitant Servant's Revolt (1799-1802) – but it was on the north-eastern frontier that the civilian-led effort to expunge the San presence was most pronounced. By 1806 and the beginning of the Second British Occupation of the Cape Colony, the commando had become established as the default means by which to eradicate San. Typically comprising both Boers and Khoesan servants, the commandos were responsible for the deaths of several thousand San during the late eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, San resistance to commando attacks was less organised than had been the

case during the ‘Bushmen Wars’ of the 1770s and 1780s.²⁶ Sustained settler-colonial incursions into the north-eastern interior coupled with the loss of access to the land and the resources upon which the hunter-gatherers depended for survival was no doubt responsible for undermining co-ordinated resistance. Even so, mobile San bands were still able to inflict significant losses on settler farmsteads. Stock theft was of particular concern for frontier farmers who despised the San and the threat they posed to sustainable settlement in the region.

Influenced by humanitarian intentions, the British colonial administration wanted to quell the violence and volatility characteristic of the north-eastern frontier and to find alternative means to subdue the San other than the commando.²⁷ However, owing to the vast expanse of the north-eastern interior, along with limited means to effect more conciliatory change, commandos continued to operate in the region well into the 1820s and 1830s. Within a few years after the establishment of a more permanent British authority over the Cape Colony, the colonial officials began to grow concerned about the procurement of labour by the commandos. This had become standard practice. Commandos would often capture survivors of raids and distribute them among frontier farmers as sought-after labourers. Labour shortages were common in the frontier districts of the Cape Colony. Slave labour was in short supply in the interior and the procurement of slaves more expensive. Stock farmers needed herders, waggon drivers, farm hands and other manual labourers for the purposes of farm production. They were particularly keen on recruiting labourers who were compliant and who accepted their racially defined subservience within the farmstead’s colonial and typically patriarchal order.

It was within this socio-economic milieu that distinct attitudes towards San adults and San children emerged and became widely shared. The explorer, John Barrow, recorded in the late 1790s that San who had been captured and transferred to the farmers when ‘very young’ had turned out to be ‘most excellent servants’.²⁸ Noting that frontier farmers were often clamouring for labourers, Barrow noted that some had prioritised the procuring of San children. Importantly, Barrow’s observations confirmed that so-called ‘Hottentot’ labourers were in short supply in the north-eastern Cape and that those available were not adequate to fulfil the labour needs of the frontier’s stock-farming economy.²⁹ Commenting on his experiences, the German traveller, Henry Lichtenstein, held the view that in order to maintain peace

26. Penn, ‘Fated to Perish’.

27. S. Newton-King, *Masters and Servants on the Cape Eastern Frontier* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 120.

28. J. Barrow, *An Account of Travels into the Interior of South Africa in the Years 1797 and 1798* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 236.

29. ‘Hottentot’ was a colonial term for Khoekhoe and San in bonded service. Though ‘Hottentots’ were a distinct category of labourer from slaves, they often endured working conditions akin to slavery.

and stability in the frontier region, the San's 'habits and ideas' had to be 'refined'.³⁰ He asserted, however, that it would be 'difficult to inspire' the San 'with new ideas, or to form new habits' given their attachment to their hunter-gatherer mode of subsistence.³¹ Nonetheless, he insisted that the San would have to change if British jurisprudence and control were to be effective across the whole territory of the Cape Colony, up to the official colonial boundaries.³²

In 1830, reporting on their findings following investigations into the conditions of the San and 'Hottentots', Commissioners J.T. Bigge and William Colebrooke emphasised that '[t]he children of the Bosjesmen, when taken at an early age, [were] capable of becoming very useful to the farmers, and in the district of Graaff-Reinet, they [were] universally employed as the leaders of the teams of oxen'.³³ Writing in the mid-1820s, the British traveller, George Thompson, argued that San children would 'live much more comfortably by becoming the herdsmen and household servants' of the colonists. He asserted that the San were 'incapable of being civilised by any other means', highlighting the limited success of missionary-led efforts.³⁴ Thompson recounted a discussion with a field commandant in the Roggeveld who had been on 32 commandos over the course of the previous 30 years. Thompson was struck by the matter-of-fact account of the field commandant in which he relayed the 'massacre of many hundreds' of San and 'the carrying away of their children into servitude'. For the field commandant, these actions were regarded as not only 'perfectly lawful, just and necessary', but also 'as a meritorious service done to the public'.³⁵ In 1836, a farmer in the Camdeboo reflected on his experiences on commandos. Noting that many children were also killed during the attacks on San kraals, he viewed the carrying away of the surviving children, 'after a kraal had been subdued', to be 'an act of mercy'.³⁶

These accounts reveal important insights into settler sentiments towards the San. In light of the ongoing, pressing need for labourers – in part due to a shortage of 'Hottentot' labour – San were considered a viable source of labour.³⁷ However, the

30. H. Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa, in the Years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806* (London: Printed for Henry Colburn, 1812-1815), Vol. 2, 66.

31. Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa*, Vol. 2, 58.

32. Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa*, Vol. 2, 66.

33. School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), Council for World Mission Archive (CWM), Literature, 'Report of the Commissioners of Inquiry upon the Hottentot Population of the Cape of Good Hope, and of the Missionary Institutions, 1830', 30.

34. G. Thompson, *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1968), Part 2, 4-5.

35. Thompson, *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*, 6-7.

36. Western Cape Archives Repository (hereafter WC), Verbatim Copies (VC) 874, 'Memorials, instructions to Field Cornets, reports of returns of stolen cattle, 1801-39'.

37. D. Moodie (ed.), *The Record: or a series of official papers relative to the condition and treatment of the native tribes of South Africa* (Cape Town: Balkema, 1960), Part V, 37.

age at which San labourers were acquired was viewed as crucial to the value that could be extracted. Adult San were portrayed as savage, hostile, and resistant to ‘taming’ – their ‘natural habits’ disqualifying them ‘for the purposes of the colonists’.³⁸ Adult San were regarded as not only of little use to settler society, but as threats to its economic prerogatives. Barrow relayed that ‘the Bushman takes the first opportunity that offers of escaping to his countrymen and contrives frequently to carry off with him a musquet [sic], and powder and ball’.³⁹ He added that one of the greatest setbacks to farmers extracting profit from their farms was the ‘depredations of the Bushmen’.⁴⁰ Thus emerged the notion that adult San were beyond refinement and redemption while San children and youth were more likely to assimilate to their required subservience. Furthermore, with the eradication of the San from the frontier districts deemed necessary for the sustainable occupation of the territory, the enforced servitude of the survivors of commando raids – which were often children – was believed to be humane and in the best interests of the children. The British colonial administration had a vested interest in the stability of the frontier districts and the economic productivity of its settlers. Though adverse to the violence associated with the commando system, the expunging of a troublesome indigenous population along with the incorporation of child survivors as servile labourers in a region struggling with labour shortages served these interests. While the means was frowned upon by the British colonial authorities, the forced assimilation of San child labourers as pliable colonial subjects was an end which was welcomed.

For the missionary movement, the commando system was detestable. Yet, key protagonists in the missionary effort at the Cape Colony, such as John Philip, also viewed San incorporation as colonial subjects as desirable. Inspired by his Scottish Enlightenment roots and holding to a belief in the oneness of humanity, Philip, however, doubted the value of having San children raised in settler-colonial households. Averse to settler abuses of San and ‘Hottentot’ labourers, Philip was sceptical of the ‘protection’ that farmers were supposed to grant child apprentices. By the mid-1820s, Philip had acquired ample insight into settler-indigenous interactions and relations at the Cape to see apprenticeship for the euphemism that it was. He believed that the so-called benevolent intentions of apprenticeship concealed, ‘under a cloud of sympathy’, a situation ‘fraught with the greatest injustice and inhumanity’.⁴¹ In the frontier districts of the Cape Colony, apprenticeship typically amounted to another means by which indigenous labourers were bonded to European masters. And the expected provision of education, training and protection was impossible to monitor and enforce. Apprenticed children were essentially indentured labourers.

38. J. Philip, *Researches in South Africa: Illustrating the Civil, Moral and Religious Condition of the Native Tribes* (London: James Duncan, 1828), Vol. 1, 42.

39. Barrow, *An Account of Travels into the Interior of South Africa*, 236.

40. Barrow, *An Account of Travels into the Interior of South Africa*, 249.

41. Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, Vol. 1, 182.

Philip, unsurprisingly, considered missions as the sites best suited to the task of subduing and assimilating San, though the British colonial authorities never fully embraced the idea, balking at the thought of large numbers of San concentrated at mission stations.⁴² For Philip, the path to ‘civilisation’ was through education, which was denied to San children absorbed into settler households and farmsteads. Missions were as much sites of education as they were of Christianisation – the former regarded as necessary and complementary for the true fulfilment of the latter, at least within the Protestant tradition. But the provision of education to indigenous subjects came with risks, for literate indigenous subjects were prone to reading colonial newspapers in addition to scripture. Literacy also enabled political engagement and the emergence of a political consciousness.⁴³ The tools of colonialism that were intended to impart sentiments of loyalty and subservience could be fashioned to inspire resistance and rebellion.⁴⁴ The full potential of this unintended consequence of educating indigenous subjects was only partially grasped by Philip and his colleagues, but they nonetheless considered their methods of assimilation as preferable to those common to the colonial farmstead or household.

Remarkably, outside missions, the provision of education was almost non-existent in the Cape Colony during the first three decades of the nineteenth century, especially for settler children. As noted, it was only from the 1830s that government involvement in education began to develop, and even then, it was as new a concept in the metropole as in the colonies. The ‘miserable state of instruction and civilisation of the youth’ in the Cape Colony was commented on in the early 1810s, with government efforts encouraged. A report of 1812 noted that most children in the Cape Colony were ‘growing up without education, without instruction, without even a knowledge of the first principles of religion and morality’, risking their becoming ‘nothing else than savages’.⁴⁵ These concerns spoke directly to the broader question of how to raise proper colonial subjects, of both settler and indigenous descent.

42. Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, Vol. 2, 276. Also, J. McDonald, ‘Encounters at Bushman Station: Reflections on the Fate of the San on the Transgariep Frontier, 1828-1833’, *South African Historical Journal*, 61, 2 (2009), 372-388 and K. Schoeman, ‘Die Londense Sendinggenootskap en die San: Die Stasies Toornberg en Hephzibah, 1814-1818’, *South African Historical Journal*, 28, 1 (1993), 221-234.

43. F. Jenz, *Missions and Modernity: Education in the British Empire, 1830-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022).

44. See the collection of chapters in D.L. Robert (ed.), *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History, 1706-1914* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2008); P. Limb, N. Etherington and P. Midgley (eds), *Grappling with the Beast: Indigenous Southern African Responses to Colonialism, 1840-1930* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010); and G. Atkins, S. Das and B.H. Murray (eds), *Chosen Peoples: The Bible, Race and Empire in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

45. House of Commons Parliamentary Papers (HCPP), 1835, No. 50, ‘Papers relative to the condition and treatment of the native inhabitants of Southern Africa, within the

Civilian initiative as precursor to state sanction

Following Britain's second occupation of the Cape Colony in 1806, the colonial administration in Cape Town, with the blessing and sanction of the Colonial Office in London, set out to impose itself jurisdictionally, politically and economically to a greater extent than had been attempted before. A crucial aspect of this endeavour was to solidify the official boundaries of the territory. In practice, this proved impossible to implement, because the colonial frontiers were porous in nature and prone to advancing or retreating in response to conflicts. The impetus for wanting to maintain stable boundaries was motivated by a desire to impose jurisdictional authority over those, both settler and indigenous, who resided within the official boundaries – to distinguish between those who could be considered as colonial subjects and those who were beyond the purview of colonial law. As such, the fluid, unstable north-eastern frontier, and its San inhabitants, had to be addressed. However, the British colonial administration had to balance its prerogatives with those of the farmers. Though peace was desirable, the reliable provision of labour was equally important. The new colonial authorities also had to contend with the challenges of trying to alter established practices and settler mindsets. In the aftermath of the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, the British administration in Cape Town grew concerned about rumours that slave raiding and trading was occurring across the north-eastern frontier, with San children being the primary targets.

The practice was well entrenched. So much so, that in 1817, the Landdrost of Graaff-Reinet, Andries Stockenström, referred to it as a 'custom'.⁴⁶ The history of San child capture and *de facto* enslavement stretched back to the eighteenth century.⁴⁷ In the 1770s, the Swedish naturalist, Anders Sparrman, conveyed that

...[t]he capture of slaves from among this race of men is by no means difficult ... [s]everal farmers, that are in want of servants, join together, and take a journey to that part of the country where the Boshiesmen live.⁴⁸

Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, or beyond the frontier of that Colony. Part I. Hottentots and Bosjesmen; Caffres; Griquas', No. 7, Reyneveldt's report, 1812, 111.

46. HCPP, No. 202, 1826-7, *Accounts of all commandos or expeditions against the Bonshmen, which have taken place at the Cape of Good Hope, since 1797; stating the number of Bonshmen killed, wounded and taken prisoners; stating also what had been done with the prisoners*, 23.

47. P. Delius and S. Trapido, 'Inboekselings and Oorlams: The Creation and Transformation of a Servile Class', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 8, 2 (1982), 214-242.

48. A. Sparrman, *Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope 1772-1776* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1975), Vol. 1, 198.

Sparrman noted the animosity harboured by frontier colonists towards the San – recounting how even pregnant women and children were ‘not exempt from the effects of the hatred and spirit of vengeance’. However, if taken alive, San children were prized and were carried back to the districts ‘with an intention’ to make them ‘slaves’.⁴⁹ For Stockenström and his superiors in Cape Town and the Colonial Office in London, the enslavement of San children along the north-eastern frontier posed a moral dilemma following the abolition of the slave trade in British colonial territories.⁵⁰ San child labour was not in question. Indeed, Stockenström himself had San child labourers in his service.⁵¹ The legitimacy of San child transfers was not in dispute, but rather the means by which San children were removed from their natal communities. The growing humanitarian influence in the Cape Colony at the time may have differed with the violent manner in which scores of San children were captured and dispersed among frontier farmers, but these differences raised speculation of how the means to their mutually desired end could be achieved. The crux of the humanitarian – and evangelical-humanitarian – intentions towards the San was captured in an exchange between two prominent protagonists in 1825, when Thomas Pringle wrote to LMS missionary John Fairbairn, inquiring of the efforts undertaken by the colonial government to ‘reclaim [the San] from savage and predatory habits’. Pringle added, ‘[t]heir character and situation are curious.’ Modern notions of childhood were still to emerge and coalesce in ways familiar to a contemporary reader, however, the idea that childhood signified a distinct period in an individual’s life in which their character and their eventual value to society could be moulded was beginning to find expression. Humanitarian concerns about the procurement of San children and their possible enslavement intersected with philosophies of childhood such that the means of transfer from San society to settler society were scrutinised, but the act of transfer itself was not.

The confiscation of San children was therefore legitimised in multiple ways. For frontier farmers, child transfer was typically enabled by the exterminatory actions of Boer-led commandos – some of which had state sanction, while some were organised among frontier farmers on an ad hoc basis. The violence inflicted on San kraals facilitated the clearing of the land for unhindered, productive stock farming while also procuring much needed labour in a context in which viable sources of labour were scarce. Notably, however, settler dehumanisation of the San also drew expression from views of San essence and character. This observation reveals two key insights into settler and humanitarian attitudes towards the San. Firstly, as noted, adult San were considered to be beyond redemption – in a sense, fated to be swept

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49. A. Sparrman, *Voyage to the Cape of Good Hope 1772-1776* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1977), Vol. 2, 111 and 34.
50. For more on Stockenström’s efforts to quell frontier violence and his reluctance to permit commandos, see Penn, ‘The British and the Bushmen’, 196.
51. C.W. Hutton (ed.), *The Autobiography of Sir Andries Stockenström* (Cape Town: J.C. Juta, 1887), Vol. 1, 214-216.

away as the tide of settler colonialism reached further into the Cape interior. Notably, one of the standout factors in the dehumanisation of the San was a widespread view that they were not only incapable of adequately providing for their children, but that they were also unfit parents. William Somerville, a Scottish doctor who toured the Cape Colony during the First British Occupation, narrated that the San had a ‘tradition of bullying their children’. He insisted that the San treated their children ‘in a cruel fashion’, which he claimed was ‘derived from force of habit’. Further, Somerville conveyed how San children ‘from the day of their birth, go almost totally naked in good, as well as bad, weather’.⁵² The belief that San made unfit parents was typically framed as due to something inherent. This sentiment became a crucial legitimising factor in San child transfers well into the 1810s and 1820s. The immutable and essential character of the victim group, which poses a threat to the interests and prerogatives of the perpetrator group, is a foundational element of genocide rhetoric and mythology. Importantly, however, there also existed among Cape settler society the view that there was a window of opportunity in the life of a San individual in which the inevitability of their ‘savageness’ could be countered, if not halted altogether.

This window of opportunity was childhood. This relates to the second key insight. If removed from the influences of their natal communities early enough, San children could be shaped into submissive servants of value to the settler-colonial economy. However, this sentiment raised questions about what came after transfer. What should a San childhood as a servant in a master’s household look like? If enslavement was unacceptable for the British colonial authorities and humanitarian sympathisers, how should forced assimilation unfold? The question of whether forced assimilation was compatible with a humanitarian, even evangelical-humanitarian, agenda is moot. As has been noted, settlers, colonial authorities and humanitarians agreed that the problem was the San as they were. Assimilation as labourers was palatable, even desirable. The challenge for the Cape’s humanitarian lobby in concert with sympathetic colonial officials, was that assimilation of San child labourers was going to take place in the master’s household. In the Cape Colony’s frontier districts, this was a context built on paternalism and if deemed necessary, the violent implementation of the master’s will. Humanitarians envisioned subservient San labourers, who were nonetheless free; servants, not slaves, who would acquire training and skills during their childhood and adolescence, while in service to the colonists. This was the underpinning for a popular humanitarian concept at the time: apprenticeship.

52. E. Bradlow and F. Bradlow (eds), *William Somerville’s Narrative of His Journeys to the Eastern Cape Frontier and to Lattakoe, 1799-1802* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1979), 213.

Conscious of the widespread and entrenched nature of the practice of procuring San child labourers in the frontier districts, Stockenström, together with the Governor of the Cape Colony, Lord Charles Somerset, sought to regulate it. In 1817, Somerset, acting largely on the advice of Stockenström, issued a proclamation concerning the procurement and apprenticeship of San child labourers. Following earlier efforts by Governor George Macartney during the First British Occupation to resolve the conflict with the San on the north-eastern frontier, Somerset's proclamation was the only piece of legislation specifically directed at dealing with the San issue. The dearth of official colonial legislation targeting San and San labour reflects a broader colonial imperative at the time, namely to subsume all non-slave labourers within the Cape Colony under the label 'Hottentot'. In the aftermath of the Second British Occupation, the Cape's colonial authorities set about establishing legal presence and acquiescence, over settler and indigenous populations. In the most obvious expression of the colonial state's consent and support for child labour, Governor John Cradock introduced an Apprenticeship Law in 1812 to regulate the indenture and treatment of 'Hottentot' children – in particular, those 'Hottentot' children born to parents in the service of the colonists. San children captured along the frontier presented a legal dilemma for the British colonial authorities, who were intent on establishing and entrenching clear legal categories of belonging. While captured San children were not 'Hottentots' in origin – culturally and ethnically – it would serve the jurisdictional purposes of the colonial system if they were absorbed into the legal category of 'Hottentot'. This sentiment was reiterated by Stockenström, who argued that it was in everyone's interests, including the San children, to see them placed 'by degrees in the same light with respect to the laws of the Colony as the Hottentots'.⁵³

In keeping with this view – and in correlation with the law as it already applied to 'Hottentot' children – Somerset's proclamation of 1817 stipulated that San children were not to be bought or sold and if acquired, were not to be treated like slaves. Those San children in service to the colonists were to be regarded as apprentices and treated well, with adequate provision of clothing, food and shelter. The proclamation emphasised the desired humane disposition of the colonists with whom the children were placed. Notably, if the suitable treatment of the children could not be guaranteed or was in doubt, the local officials were entitled to remove the children and place them in the service of colonists of better repute. Though highly idealistic and practically impossible to implement, law represents ideology, and Somerset's 1817 proclamation highlights the colonial state's ambition to see San children raised as compliant subjects.

53. HCPP, No. 50, 1835, *Reports and Papers relating to Depredations of, and Expeditions against, the Bushmen*, 57.

The raising of San children in settler households served three purposes. Firstly, it removed San children from the influence of their natal communities and the unwanted character which they would inevitably imbibe if raised by their parents. Secondly, it facilitated the forced assimilation and subservience of San while providing much needed labour. And thirdly, from 1817 onwards, it placed San children within the territorial boundaries of the Cape Colony under the purview of the colonial state's legal jurisdiction. This satisfied the humanitarian imperative of 'protecting' indigenous peoples for, in theory, San children in settler households were classified as legal subjects. As I have argued elsewhere, for many of the Cape's prominent humanitarians, subject status extended certain legal protections and colonial obligations to indigenous peoples, however limited and imperfect.⁵⁴

Conclusion: San child malleability and colonial childhoods

Though the colonial state did not have the resources or capacity to monitor the full implementation of the regulations of 1817, it legitimised a long-established practice of San child transfer that had been initiated and established by civilians. As such, the colonial state played an enabling role in a civilian-led process of child transfer, subsequent to the process becoming widespread among frontier stock farming communities. This contrasts with the leading role of the state, and state apparatuses, that is often taken for granted in genocide studies. The colonial state played a facilitating role in the history of San child transfer. Notably, the colonial state's attempts to regulate San child transfers were not as a result of concerns about the act of indigenous child transfer, but rather due to concerns over the possible purchasing and enslavement of San children. The act of San child transfer was not in question, as the colonial state recognised the important source of labour indigenous children were in the frontier districts, and it preferred for indigenous children to be trained in subservience and acquiescence in settler households than to be raised as possible threats in their natal communities. These attitudes emerged in response to ideas around childhood, in one of its earliest iterations and expressions in South African colonial history. As such, indigenous children began to be seen as crucial actors in the future viability and longevity of the settler-colonial state.

Remarkably, the fate of indigenous children was of interest to several audiences: colonial authorities, settlers and humanitarians, including evangelical-humanitarians. All these audiences had a vested interest in the fate of indigenous children. Indigenous children were particularly vulnerable in settler-colonial contexts shaped by processes we now identify as genocidal. They were susceptible to being killed along with their parents, as San children and youth were. However, if they survived the physical destruction of their natal communities, they were liable to being

54. J. McDonald, 'Debating San Provenance and Disappearance: Frontier Violence and the Assimilationist Impulse of Humanitarian Imperialism', *Historia*, 67, 1 (2022), 2-27.

absorbed into the perpetrator society for various ends and purposes, often, though not exclusively, determined by economic prerogatives. In the Cape Colony of the early nineteenth century, the absorption of San children into settler society found common cause among colonial authorities, settlers and humanitarians. It was what came after transfer that created contestation. While Khoesan conditions of labour and servitude on settler farms and in settler households bore striking similarities to slave experiences, the British colonial authorities insisted on a legal distinction between ‘Hottentot’ and slave, with concomitant political and economic rights and entitlements. Humanitarians were supportive of this approach while most settlers complained about the impact of humanitarian legislation on their ability to acquire and keep Khoesan labourers, and to maintain paternal authority over servants and slaves.

For the colonial authorities and humanitarians – who overlapped at times, though more so in the 1820s than in the 1810s – San children growing up in servitude in settler households presented an opportunity to raise proper colonial subjects, even if settlers may have had different ideas of how to instil discipline and subservience. Crucially, the opportunity was due to San childhood, a distinctive period in the San individual’s life during which they could be moulded into something more desirable and of more use to settler-colonial society. John Philip noted this in his widely read book, *Researches in South Africa*, published in 1828. When commenting on the apprenticeship of Khoesan children, he stressed that ‘early impressions are the most abiding’ and that ‘the future character is formed in early life’.⁵⁵ The future of indigenous children spoke directly to the moral mythology that underpinned the British colonial enterprise of the early nineteenth century, which occasionally found common cause with humanitarian aspirations for indigenous subjects.

While humanitarians were sceptical of settler motives and reluctant to trust them to fulfil their moral obligations in raising colonial subjects, missionary efforts to the San were largely unsuccessful, lacking the financial and human resources to make a significant impact. For the British colonial authorities and humanitarians, the settler population of the frontier districts was a necessary constituent in raising a moral empire. Notions of childhood intersected with European narratives of the San in intriguing, if unsettling, ways that served to legitimate San child transfers. Visions of a colonial childhood came to underpin justifications for San child transfer and posited the process – when regulated according to ‘humane’ principles – as being in the best interests of San children.

55. Philip, *Researches in South Africa*, Vol. 1, 183.

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