



## Smoking around the campfire: A San encounter with the colonial

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### Abstract

In 1873 Joseph Orpen, resident of Nomansland, engaged a San<sup>1</sup> man Qing to guide a combined force of levies and mounted police through the Maloti mountains in present-day Lesotho where they hoped to intercept a group of reluctant Hlubi rebels under chief Langalibalele. Orpen was not only a colonial official but also a keen scholar. In response to his questions Qing commented on some of the rock paintings they saw on their short journey and recounted folklore. A year later Qing's narratives and his comments on rock art were published along with Orpen's account of the journey and 'remarks' by the celebrated linguist and collector of |Xam narrative, Wilhelm Bleek in an article in the Cape Monthly Magazine (CMM). Orpen's piece has enjoyed a seminal position in San studies ever since, especially in the field of rock art. The encounter between Qing and Orpen occurred in a context of colonial violence. Not only was the campaign that was being pursued against Langalibalele and his men unnecessary but the San had been subject to genocidal attacks by both regular and irregular colonial forces for a considerable period of time, and the studies of San rock art and narrative at the time were largely carried out in an intellectual climate that saw the extinction of the San as inevitable. This article will locate the CMM article more firmly in its colonial context by combining a close reading of elements of the CMM article itself with a consideration of a wider body of writing that relates to Orpen's piece.

In 1873 Joseph Orpen was appointed the British resident of Nomansland, a region that today straddles the north-western parts of the eastern Cape and south-eastern KwaZulu-Natal. The area still lay outside British control, and Orpen's role, in his own words, was 'to initiate the policy of annexing to the Cape the territories between that Colony and Natal' (Orpen 1964 [1908]: 1). The annexation itself was accomplished in 1874. Before then, though, towards the end of 1873, Orpen was called upon by the Natal government to contribute a force of African levies to help apprehend the Hlubi chieftain Langalibalele and his men who had taken refuge in the Maloti mountains of present-day Lesotho after refusing to surrender guns to the Natal authorities. Orpen's force linked up with a contingent of mounted police under Inspector James Murray Grant, a career officer in the Frontier and Armed Mounted Police who, in his own mind at least, had overall command (Mitchell & Challis 2008: 400–1).<sup>2</sup> Orpen (1874: 1) managed to 'secure' the 'services' of a man named Qing to guide the expedition through the Maloti.<sup>3</sup> Qing was a man of San origin and identity who worked as a hunter for Nqasha, son of Moorosi, chief of the BaPhuthi, 'an ethnically















































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