

Rain Stories: Interpreting Water Beings in the Folklore of the Southern African Khoisan and their Descendants

Anne Solomon

The importance of rain and rain animals in the lore of San- and Khoe-speaking peoples in southern Africa is well-known, especially via studies of rock paintings. The figure of the 'Rain Bull', !Khwa, in the nineteenth century oral narratives of the /Xam is therefore of considerable interest. Interpreting this being, especially via recent interviews with Khoisan descendants, presents various difficulties. Conclusions depend significantly on the methods employed by analysts of the texts, and pre-existing ideas about the nature of San religious belief and practice. This paper outlines a different reading of and approach to understanding the figure of !Khwa to that presented by De Prada-Samper (2018) and highlights the need for a more rigorous approach to the materials, especially with regard to methods and assessments of historical continuities.

Keywords: Khoisan, San, oral narrative, rain, !Khwa, water animal, southern Africa, hunter-gatherers.

Introduction

Few bodies of folklore are as celebrated as that of the /Xam of South Africa. Their extensive testimonies fill almost one hundred and forty quarto notebooks and have been of huge importance to anthropologists, archaeologists, historians, artists and literary scholars. The oral testimonies, in a now extinct language, were recorded and translated by the linguist Wilhelm Bleek and, especially, his sister-in-law, Lucy Lloyd, beginning in the 1870s.¹

The /Xam texts describe a world seen through the fascinating and very different consciousness of a hunter-gatherer people, but are not easy

¹ The entire archive is available online at www.lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za.

to read.² Because of their ambiguities and gaps (let alone that two of the key notebooks, dealing with religious belief, have been lost), they call for considerable interpretation. Much of the attention paid to them in the last four decades has been in rock art research, and in relation to the (contested) claim that the essence of /Xam cultural and spiritual life was 'shamanism'. It has been argued that the stories and accounts – both their content and the /Xam cosmography – derived from shamanic hallucinations and, ultimately, the hard-wiring of the human brain (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1980, 1981; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988). Yet, one of the most powerful and important figures in /Xam narratives is not the 'shaman', but !Khwa, the rain animal or Rain Bull, who is the thunderstorm, the rain cloud, the water in the waterhole and much more besides (Solomon 2007, 2008). The importance of rain, water, rain animals and water-dwellers in Khoisan thought is recorded from across South Africa (e.g. Orpen 1874; Hoff 1988, 2007, 2011; Leeuwenburg 1970; Potgieter 1955; Schmidt 1979; Stow 1905; Woodhouse 1992). In South African rock art, rain and rainmaking are among the few securely documented themes.

Attention to themes of rain in the /Xam materials collected by Bleek and Lloyd has been amplified by recent explorations of lore among Khoisan descendants in the western and central areas of South Africa (see Figure 1). This was pioneered by the anthropologist Ansie Hoff (e.g. 1997, 1998, 2007, 2011). Dorothea Bleek, the daughter of Wilhelm Bleek, had revisited the area from where the /Xam narrators originated in 1910 (Bleek 1929) but found no narrators or continuing storytelling tradition. Hoff's work, principally from 1991 onward, suggested otherwise. She uncovered a remarkable wealth of lore among elderly people, some of whom would have been born perhaps fifty years after the compilation of the Bleek and Lloyd archive. Much of this testimony focused on beliefs about water and rain, and beings and creatures associated with it. Hoff suggests that 'in spite of considerable culture change' these testimonies 'complement' the Bleek and Lloyd texts and provide 'a wider perspective of the Water Bull' (Hoff 1998: 123). De Prada-Samper, who has also collected stories in recent years from Khoisan descendants in the arid interior region of South Africa known as the Karoo, similarly situates his work in relation to a continuing, if altered, tradition

² The terminology is contested, but in my view the term 'San', despite various deficiencies, is preferable to 'Bushman' as a designation for Southern African peoples speaking languages of the Ju and Tuu families, most of whom were formerly hunter-gatherers. /Xam is a language belonging to the !Ui branch of the Tuu group. To avoid confusion, the term /Xam is used here to refer strictly to the 19th century group whose testimonies form the Bleek and Lloyd archive. Khoekhoe, or Khoe, languages were spoken especially by people associated with a pastoralist economy. 'Khoisan' is a term coined to refer to both language families.

(e.g. De Prada-Samper 2018). The question is what this 'wider perspective' achieves and how it amplifies the original /Xam testimonies, as the recent recorders suggest. This proposition, the methodologies employed (which have received relatively little critical attention) and the utility of these studies for understanding the nineteenth century texts are examined here, with a specific focus on !Khwa, the rain animal of the /Xam.

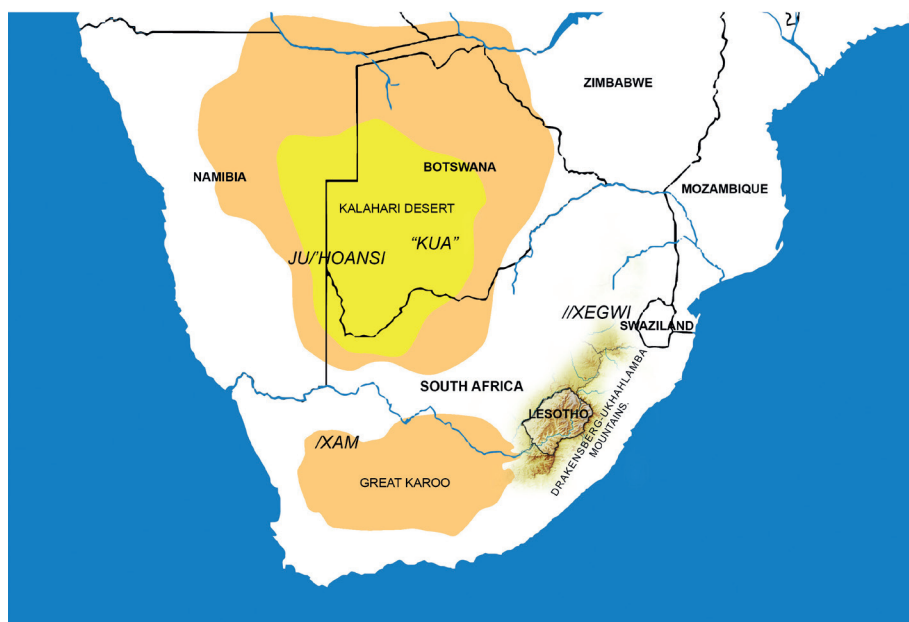


Figure 1. Peoples, places and environmental features mentioned in the text. 'Kua' is the term used by Valiente-Noailles to describe various central-eastern San groups, including the G/wi and G/ana

The rain in the /Xam texts

In some ways, the /Xam figure of !Khwa is unambiguous. As noted, he is the dangerous storm incarnate as well as the water in the water pit or waterhole, with which he is identical. The relevant text describes how a dead sorcerer's heart falls into 'the waterpit which is alive' and sounds like rain: 'That is why it sounds like rain, because it enters water which also lives, as does he who is a sorceror [sic]' (Bleek 1935: 32). However, he also leaves the waterpit and travels the sky as a cloud animal, !khwa ka xoro, a term conventionally translated as the Rain Bull or water bull (e.g. Bleek 1956: 260). The Rain Bull's body is the rain cloud, and he 'walks' the countryside on his

'legs', which are the columns of rain or hail that stream from his cloud-body (Bleek 1933a: 311; B-LC. L.VIII-7: 6652 rev.). The mist is his breath (B-LC. L.VIII-16: 7435). He also appears in other guises, such as a whirlwind (e.g. B-LC. L-II-37: 3337 rev.).³

The principal stories and accounts of his character concern his wrath if offended. The following extract gives a flavour of the stories:

This is what the old people say, the rain wants to kill us when it is angry with us. The rain attacks the hut angrily, and the hail beats down on us breaking the huts and the cold wind gets in to the people in consequence. It drives out the people; and the man, because of whom the rain is angry with the people, is the one whom the wind first lifts up, and blows up to the sky. Then he goes floating about in the sky, then floats out of the sky and drops down into a pond, then he stays in the pond and becomes a frog. Then the people one after another go out and fly up into the sky...

Meanwhile the karosses [skin cloaks] become springbok which lie down and roll, thereby shaking out (the water from their skins), while the sticks and branches of the hut become bushes; then the arrows (or reeds) just stand about and so do the quivers. The skins of which people have made the quivers turn into springbok...they get ears; meanwhile the rain turns altogether into a pond, because its body goes into it (Bleek 1933a: 299–301).

A number of the stories, especially those given by Bleek and Lloyd's sole female /Xam narrator, !kweiten //ta-ken, deal with girls who disobey the puberty requirements, which included seclusion in a special menarcheal hut and only eating certain foods, prepared by appropriate relatives. A typical tale (e.g. B-LC. L.VIII-17: 7473–7519) is that of the girl of the 'Early Race' who, bored and hungry in seclusion, sneaked out of her special hut, went to the waterhole, killed a water's child (a striped creature) and cooked and ate it. An angry !Khwa, in the form of a whirlwind, enveloped her, whisked her away and took her into the waterpit (i.e. drowned her, though she lived on in the form of a frog). Disobedient girls taken by !Khwa were also seen as the reflection of stars on the water's surface (Bleek and Lloyd 1911: 391–392). Relatives might also be punished in the same way. Though !Khwa was especially associated with the punishment of young women, men might be similarly punished. Hunters who shot and killed the rain animal in the belief that he was an eland (*Taurotragus oryx*) discovered when they tried

³ References to the original /Xam archive are represented here as follows: Initially B-LC (for 'Bleek-Lloyd Collection'), followed by 'L' indicating the recorder (Lucy Lloyd). The figure in Roman numerals indicates the notebook series, and is followed by the number of the notebook in that series. The final figure refers to the page number of the notebook.

to cook the meat on the fire that it evaporated like water. They were shut in a hut by the rain before being taken to a pond and turned into frogs (B-LC.L.VIII-16: 7461–7462, B-LC.L.VIII-17: 7463-7472).

That story echoes those about control of the rain (see further below). This concerned either measures to diminish the damaging storm or causing rain to fall. The former involved control of !Khwa, the violent rain. Gentle, rejuvenating rain was conceptualised as a female rain animal (B-LC. L.II-25: 2227), which the /Xam narrators said would be enticed from the waterhole and slaughtered. Where its blood ran, rain would fall (Bleek 1933b: 376). This conceptual connection between blood and water also features in the menarcheal tales, in which !Khwa is attracted to menstruating women by their smell, and may be illustrated in the rock art (Solomon 1992, 2017)⁴.

Issues and problems

The stories and accounts gathered in the last three decades are replete with accounts of the role of water and water beings in the lore of Khoisan descendants. These stories are fascinating and important in their own right. The subtext – with acknowledgement of the changes wrought since Bleek and Lloyd recorded the original /Xam stories – is that nineteenth century /Xam folklore has persisted into the present. Hoff (1998) gathered a great deal of information about an enduring belief in a water bull or ‘weather bull’, principally from the general area formerly home to Bleek and Lloyd’s /Xam informants. The variety of views expressed defy summary, but there are indeed affinities with the Rain Bull described in the 1870s. For example, he was both the water in the waterpit and a sky creature; Hoff’s narrators spoke of him as ‘in’ a cloud (whereas Bleek and Lloyd’s materials suggest that he actually was the cloud, not just ‘in’ it). The water bull was wrathful when angered, and linked to bad weather. In some accounts he was especially associated with young women and variously linked to the menarcheal rites of passage. The parallels seem clear, with the implication that nineteenth century or older lore has survived, in some cases virtually unchanged, into the present day.

Closer scrutiny reveals various issues, of historicity and method. Group identities today are plainly very different from the 1870s, after decades of colonialism and destruction of older lifeways. The /Xam language is extinct; most Khoe and San descendants speak Afrikaans as their first language; and many of both groups were destined to become labourers on

⁴ A motif in rock art that has received attention is a thin red line fringed with white dots. It may be interpreted as representing blood (the red line) and raindrops (the white dots).

the farms of European settlers from the late eighteenth century until recent times. In the nineteenth century, and even beyond, various distinctions can be drawn between /Xam (former hunter-gatherers) and Khoe (herder) lore and practices, though there are many comparable elements. Perhaps the most striking difference is the (continuing) prominence of a Water Snake in Khoe speakers' lore (e.g. Schmidt 1997, 2018), whereas such a being is absent from the /Xam texts. (There is, however, one /Xam reference to a girl abducted by !Khwa who 'felt she was a snake'; the narrator added that this was great snake 'whose name is feared', and which appeared in rock paintings. (B-LC.L.V-13: 5017 rev, 5018). However, it seems that in the present the parallel and overlapping traditions of Khoe and San have long since become blended as traditional identities have blurred.

Hoff is sensitive to the problems of claims for a continuing tradition. For example, she distinguishes between folk memory and beliefs in the present: 'Today only the elderly have knowledge of the Water Bull. To them the Water Bull is a reality, but their knowledge is based mainly on memories and not on current experiences as it is in the case of the Water Snake (cf. Hoff 1997). Therefore, when questions are asked about the relationship between the Water Bull and people the information becomes confused, because informants today consider only the relationship with the Water Snake' (Hoff 1998: 110).

Hoff's data suggests therefore that the figure of the Water Bull of the /Xam tradition, a mere memory for the most elderly, has been supplanted in the present by an active belief in water snakes, associated with Khoe-speakers and former herders. But separating out 'Khoe' and 'San' elements more generally is more complicated. It seems that contemporary informants are heirs to a new, hybridised lore that has additionally been transformed by the preferences and proclivities of generations of creative storytellers. Barnes (n.d.) gives an excellent example, from her work among a Basarwa group in Botswana.⁵ They evinced a general belief in spirits or 'ghosts', but with enormous variety, and even contradictory views, when it came to accounts of their appearance, activities and powers. In a society where religious thought is not centralised or prescribed, individuals are free to imagine how such phenomena are, within a larger belief structure, but according to their own imaginative abilities and lived experiences; this contributes to dynamic and changing traditions.

Barnard, an anthropologist who has specialised in the study of Khoisan peoples, offers an important insight in this regard: 'In Khoisan society, especially in the case of the Bushmen...religious notions have a fluid

⁵ The Basarwa are often considered to be 'San' hunter-gatherers, though this designation is problematic – see Motzafi-Haller 1994.

character which has led historically to cross-cultural uniformity, and at the same time, to intra-cultural diversity' (Barnard 1988, 1992: 263–264). This 'intra-cultural diversity' is of clear relevance to studies of the lore of Khoisan descendants in the present, in which the method largely consists of cross-matching isolated individual motifs. Studies of the figure of !Khwa provide a good example of the issues involved.

Interpreting !Khwa

Belief in a water-dwelling bovid-like creature is recorded not only from the Karoo and westerly areas of South African and Namibia but also from the mountains of Lesotho (Orpen 1874) and Mpumalanga Province in north-eastern South Africa (Potgieter 1955, cited by Barnard 1988, Hoff 1998: 110). Such a creature is also a well-documented motif in rock paintings and petroglyphs (e.g. Woodhouse 1992). It is not clear, however, to what extent it was conceptualised in the same way by these widely separated groups; it has, for example, even been proposed that the nineteenth century Lesotho testimony, by a San man, drew on or was influenced by the significantly different lore of Nguni-speaking farming peoples (Jolly 2005); rain and water lore is important to many groups across Africa (e.g. Siegel 2008). Some crossover with the beliefs of Bantu-speaking farmers through many centuries is certainly of interest, but the mere presence of rain animals, or a rain bull, in the oral lore and rock art of different groups, while noteworthy, requires further interrogation, alongside explorations of change in the oral lore of groups in one area at different times.

De Prada-Samper deems it important to ask how the 'water creature' relates to 'water as a physical element'. His central proposition in this regard, as stated in the abstract, is that 'for the !Xam and their contemporary descendants the water-creature was, and still is, water itself' (2018: 13). In the case of the /Xam materials, that !Khwa is the incarnation of water is established knowledge that hardly needs demonstration; no writer, to my knowledge, has argued otherwise. In my own work, I have emphasised this exact point about the nature of !Khwa, stating that 'His home is the water-hole (in fact he is the water in the waterhole)' (Solomon 2007: 152).

One of De Prada-Samper's main aims, however, is the identification of continuities in beliefs held from the 1870s through to the present. Indeed, he even proposes that a rock engraving dating to 2700 to 1600 years BP 'resonates' with stories about 'concentrations of water that turn out to be literally living bodies of liquid, and of living beings that turn out to be liquid' (De Prada-Samper 2018: 34). But impressionistic resonances are insufficient evidence for continuing traditions. The problems of assessing

similarity and difference are huge. For example, is it important that the /Xam conceived of !Khwa as identical with water, whereas Hoff's informants seemed to differ, saying that he travelled 'in a cloud', rather than actually being a cloud? Is this difference really significant? Or do both characterisations serve the same function? How can this be determined without consideration of the wider body of lore? Simple tracking of motif similarities and recurrences tends to reinforce an homogenous picture of San thought through time, with the effect of reifying continuing 'traditions'. At the same time, some differences may not be significant, if motifs fulfil the same narrative function.

In fact, though he aims to demonstrate that such continuities exist, De Prada-Samper (2018: 28) provides little convincing evidence. He argues that 'all over the area people refer very explicitly to the fact that the water is alive', but the examples are not persuasive. He records that 'Lena van Rooy...told me that Meidegat (known also as Maiden's Pool, in nearby Bushman's Kloof resort), 'is not dead, it's alive' (hy's ook nie dood nie, hy lewe)'. However, this translation is questionable. A more literal, but more apt, translation from Afrikaans is: 'he's also not dead, he lives'. Hypothetically, this might indeed mean that the water creature they spoke of was identical with water, but it is as, or more, plausibly interpreted as meaning that the creature still exists and is still active in the present; that the belief in him is not dead; that the creature's presence is not just in the lore of yesterday - he lives on today. This is very different from meaning that the 'water is alive'. His second example, of a man who spoke of pools that were 'baie lewendig' is more persuasive but, again, the Afrikaans term 'lewendig' has many meanings. One online dictionary⁶ lists over twenty meanings, several of which might apply in this instance, including 'active' or 'lively', not necessarily 'alive'. As with the previous example, it can have the sense of 'real in the present', and does not conclusively refer to the water as a living being.

De Prada-Samper (2018: 16) also proposes that 'Solomon conceives the "rain-animal" as something essentially apart from water, an equivalent to the "lesser god" of the Ju|'hoansi of the Kalahari which, like !Khwa, is "linked to death and its domain" (Solomon 2007: 152)'. The reasoning behind this interpretation of my work is unclear, since I have unambiguously emphasised that the /Xam figure of !Khwa is identical with water. In another kind of analysis, this detail is any case not crucial. The baseline is the different method(s) I have used to understand the figure of the rain bull. In view of Barnard's insight regarding 'cross-cultural uniformity' in belief and

⁶ See the first example of 'lewendig' as used in a sentence at <https://glosbe.com/af/en/lewendig>. Note also that 'alive' is not the most usual translation of the word, though it is one of the more common meanings.

lore, larger comparative studies are of clear utility. Specifically, structural commonalities and divergences, rather than matching up discrete and de-contextualized motifs, are of clear relevance.

Barnard (1998: 224) notes that that 'For all Khoisan peoples...God has one or more adversaries'. By 'God' he means the figure generally associated with creation and sometimes good deeds, though he may be 'morally ambiguous' to various degrees. It is characteristic of Khoisan thought that phenomena are not simply good or bad; the rain, for example, can bring life or, as the storm, can kill. To give a few examples: the Ju/'hoansi of the Kalahari desert tell of ≠Gao!na (one of many names given to him), the great god, and a lesser god, //Gauwa, associated with the eastern and western skies respectively. These figures are broadly associated with life and death, though they might occasionally work together (Marshall 1999). In north eastern South Africa, the //Xegwi told of a creator and custodian of the dead, /a'an, and a lesser being who assisted him, named /a'an 'e la tleni (/a'an the small) (Potgieter 1955). The Khoe-speaking Nama tell of Tsûi-//Goab and //Gâuab. The G/wi (Khoe-speaking hunter-gatherers of the eastern Kalahari) similarly tell of N!adima and G/auama (Barnard 1992: 192). Their neighbours, the G/ana, speak of the 'god', //gamá, who is contrasted with a 'bad man' of unknown origin named Kaonxa (Valiente-Noailles 1993: 194–197). There are differences in the 'great' and 'lesser' gods in the lore of these groups that this brief summary cannot cover but the broader structural parallels hold.

Though not impossible, it would be strange indeed if the /Xam were an exception in this regard. The nineteenth century texts clearly identify the creator figure, known as /Kaggen, or the mantis (B-LC passim). Though he is the creator of the world and its contents, he is also a mischievous and often malicious prankster who can restore life but is also prone to trickery and spitefulness. /Xam myths are founded on the idea that, in the first days, /Kaggen was busy creating the world, but it was as yet imperfect. Animals and people had not been separated. These people of the Early Race, 'First Bushmen' or 'first-at-sitting people' (B-LC.L.II-35: 3149 rev.-3151) behaved in ways ranging from anti-social to uncultured to plain stupid. This makes fertile ground for storytelling.

Only after a momentous event (variously explained) were people and animals separated, with people acquiring culture, manners, common sense and social propriety. The most prominent story explaining the transition is that of the male lynx and the young female anteater. Several versions exist. In essence, the odd couple elope, pursued by the anteater-girl's mother, whose burrowing makes the earth tremble. This inappropriate relationship of carnivore and herbivore, hunter and prey somehow leads to a new order, in which animals only marry their own kind. People too would henceforth behave like people, cooking food on the fire, using artefacts, wearing

clothes and observing a long list of rules about food that could and could not be eaten (e.g. B-LC.L.II-3: 394–406, 416–428, 442–448, 465–475, B-LC.II.-2: 323–356).

Lewis-Williams (2000) proposed that /Kaggen was the sole 'deity' of the /Xam; however, the case can be made for !Khwa, the rain bull, as the structural equivalent of the death-linked 'lesser god' of other groups. As noted, the /Xam narrators described the subterranean realm as the place of the dead, while water was itself a place of death: in the menarcheal and allied tales, transgressors are drowned but 'live' thereafter in the water as frogs or water flowers. In accordance with the /Xam philosophy that phenomena are not black and white, or simply good or evil, !Khwa is the guardian of social values (punishing those who go against the social norms) as well as being a dangerous destroyer.

In several ways !Khwa is analogous to the figure of Kaonxa described by the G/ana of the eastern Kalahari Desert, Botswana, though there can be no direct historical relationship. One of Valiente Noailles' informants said of Kaonxa: 'He comes back from the west...he became xonjapa, a big snake, all we know is that he lives in places where there is big water. And when a person that comes to get water, he may just splash him a lot of water and dig him into the water' (i.e. drown him) (Valiente Noailles 1993: 196). Another informant described him as 'the master of all illnesses and all the sicknesses and all the bad things... Even if he lives in the places full of water, he can bring here strong winds that destroy our huts, storms of rain that come down very hard and hit us like hail' (ibid.)

It seems that !Khwa fulfils a similar role to the 'lesser god' figures in other bodies of Khoisan lore. There is nevertheless one crucial difference. Other groups apparently conceive(d) of the great and lesser gods as existing contemporaneously. This is not the case in the /Xam texts. !Khwa and the trickster-creator /Kaggen never appear in the same narratives, or as direct adversaries. Rather, they belong to different and distinct temporal realms. /Kaggen belongs solely to the mythical time when the world was being created, animal-people lived lives lacking in social norms and irreversible death did not yet exist. Reviving the animal-people of the 'Early Race' who had ostensibly died was one of /Kaggen's specialities (e.g. B-LC.L.VIII.-32: 8794–8881). According to one widely told story about its origin, irreversible death came about because the young hare, distraught over the death of his mother, disbelieved the moon's reassurances that she would return alive, just as the moon waxes and wanes (B-LC.L.XXV: 2361–2364). !Khwa, the figure of death and guardian of social (especially sexual) mores belongs to the time when, unlike the situation in the mythical first era, death had become a reality and ever-present threat and people, now separated from animals, were expected to behave accordingly, in ways befit-

ting human beings, not wild creatures. This is so even though several of the stories about !Khwa and disobedient 'new maidens' concern people of the Early Race, and are set in the mythical creation days. That would seem to be primarily a narrative device, which reinforces the message by enshrining it in myth and endowing it with time-honoured power. !Khwa is a force of importance primarily in the present, not the mythical first times. The stories of him plainly function to shape behaviour in the post-creation, post-mythical time that the narrators and their audiences inhabit, in which people are expected to behave like people, and not like their human-animal forebears.

The nature of !Khwa is closely tied to these themes of the 'evolution' of people from asociality to full humanity. This is most evident in his role as punisher of those who offend against social norms, and the menarcheal proscriptions in particular. The stories of !Khwa engage with this insofar as they deal with the reversions and regressions that result from flouting social conventions. This is well illustrated by the way in which people's belongings were said to revert to an unworked or natural state: skin clothing would become the animal it was made from; arrows became reeds again, and the huts' sticks and branches reverted to being bushes (e.g. B-LC.L.II-37: 3335 rev.-3336 rev.; B-LC.L.VIII.-27: 8399 rev.). !Khwa is the agent of that reversion. A variety of animals were said to belong to the rain, including some snakes, lizards, water tortoises, certain birds and unidentified poisonous creatures – perhaps caterpillars – with hairy backs that live on branches but also enter the water (B-LC.L.VIII.I: 6074–6077). It is surely no accident that most of the fauna with which he is associated belongs to the lower orders of the animal world – especially reptiles and insects. It appears that the /Xam had an understanding of evolutionary complexity that is ultimately not dissimilar to our own. !Khwa is also linked to food taboos, which similarly relate to the transition to full human-ness (B-LC.L.V-6: 4377 rev.-4407 rev.).

Discussion

The import of the foregoing is twofold. First, the figure of !Khwa cannot be seen in isolation from the larger corpus of /Xam mythology, and its temporal dimension in particular, since his characteristics are inextricable from the theme of sociality, contrasted with the primitivity of the first people. Second, motif recurrences are not necessarily evidence of cultural continuities or other direct relationships. This is illustrated by the clear parallels (some differences notwithstanding) between the figure of Kaonxa, in Botswana, and the !Khwa of the South African /Xam, unrelated groups living far distant from one another.

It can, of course, plausibly be argued that if what appears to be the same motif is collected from people in the same area, even 140 years apart, then the chances are higher that it is indeed an indicator of cultural continuity. However, this must remain speculative, until additional evidence or argument can be adduced. An overview of the broad contours of Khoisan narratives and religious thought indicates that there are structural commonalities over space and through time that are independent of relatedness between groups.

Though exploring continuities in belief and lore is unquestionably of interest, without further contextualisation and efforts to assess and explain similarities and differences, the utility of the exercise is limited. It is certainly valid to argue, as has Hoff, that recently collected materials 'complement' or amplify those provided by the /Xam narrators who shared their world with Bleek and Lloyd. However, decontextualized motifs and minor or specific details provide limited insights. This is because of the way in which the beliefs and accounts of narrators are individualised, and because of the nature of storytelling. From a phenomenological perspective: as occurs in any imaginative art (including rock art), narrators are not simply concerned with the reproduction of received knowledge or ideas or perpetuating tradition, and may even adapt stories and images to contest received ideas. As well as incorporating personal perspectives, they embellish for narrative or dramatic effect in the moment and are concerned with the logic of the composition as a whole. This may entail tweaking or changing of details in order to create a story (or artwork) that is consistent with itself. In other words, details may be adapted in the service of narrative (or visual) coherence. Accordingly, continuities may be better identified by focusing on structural parallels and divergences, rather than motif details.

In terms of the determinants of the content of belief and lore, De Prada-Samper (2018: 17) considers available water resources, claiming that 'As we will see, how the water-creature is conceived in a given area is to a large extent determined by the kind of hydrological resources available in it'. But, though the question of environmental influence or determination is a valid one, his conclusion that conceptions of !Khwa are environmentally determined 'to a large extent' is arguable. He states that 'It is important to stress that the |xam narratives summarized above are consistent with a very arid landscape in which the main sources of water are, rather than rivers and streams, essentially wells and waterholes, most of them seasonal and unpredictable' (De Prada-Samper 2018: 19). How then does he account for the fact that the most studied of all southern African Khoisan groups, the Kalahari Ju/'hoansi, who live in precisely such an arid environment, have minimal rain beliefs and associated ceremonial, and no belief in a water-dwelling bovid? And yet their close neighbours to the east in the

Kalahari Desert, the G/ana, tell of the being called Kaonxa, who resembles the /Xam !Khwa in significant ways? Or that the rain lore of the Lesotho San – a water-rich landscape replete with rivers and streams – closely parallels that of the /Xam in the arid Karoo region? Rather, from a more phenomenological and less deterministic perspective, the specific ways that the rain animal appears in the lore of a particular group at a given time is a complex interplay of factors that are not easily disentangled.

!Khwa and 'shamanism'

Given the attention given to the allegedly 'shamanistic' nature of San thought and art, no discussion of rain animals is complete without mention of this debate. The shamanistic hypothesis posits both story motifs and the imagery of rock art as grounded in trance visions and 'neuropsychological' functioning (see especially Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988). The figure of the rain is relevant because the hypothesis was originally based on Lewis-Williams' interpretation of accounts and paintings of rainmaking and rain animals (Lewis-Williams 1980). That reading holds that rainmakers described by the /Xam were shamans in trance who believed that they travelled underwater, where they controlled the rain animal.

Space does not permit the details of this debate to be covered here, but some points may be made. My own reading (e.g. Solomon 2008, 2011) is that the /Xam texts do not mention shamanism or describe a trance dance (the latter point has also been made by Skotnes 1996). Rather, the /Xam testimonies describe 'ordinary' people addressing dead family members to act on their behalf in the underworld where they live after death; this may be to control the rain or game. For example, one narrator described measures to stop dangerously stormy weather:

'The rain [i.e. !Khwa] is addressed in the following manner by the old men: first they speak to the dead men who are with the rain... Then they speak to the rain itself...Then the rain thunders sounding little...' *(Bleek 1933a: 303–304; my parentheses and emphasis).*

It was also reported that:

'Dead people who come out of the ground are those of whom my parents used to say, that they rode the rain, because the thongs with which they held it were like the horse's reins, they bound the rain because they owned it' *(Bleek 1933a: 305).*

In other words, it is dead kin who control !Khwa at the request of the living, not living 'rainmakers' visiting the death realm in a trance state.

Named rainmakers appear to be dead family or friends, as explicitly stated in one story, where the narrator tells of his father asking a rainmaker named !nuin-/kuiten for rain:

‘You, who seem to be !nuin-/kuiten, you used to say to me that when the time came that you were dead, if I called upon you, you would hear me, you would let rain fall for me (Bleek 1933b: 383).

The peoples’ direct address to !Khwa cited above (Bleek 1933a: 303–304) is of interest because of its phrasing. People implore him to ‘put thy tail between thy legs/For the women are looking shocked at thee/Thou shouldst put thy tail between thy legs for the children’. This points to another notable dimension of !Khwa’s persona, namely that of a sexually rampant being. This emphasis on !Khwa’s dangerous masculinity is in accordance with his attraction to young women, as described in the menarcheal tales. Those tales deal on the one hand with the danger young women at menarche pose, especially to men: ‘when she is a maiden she has the rain’s magic power’ (B-LC.L.V-13: 4989), including the power to kill with lightning (B-LC.L.V-20: 5618–5622, 5624) or turn men to stone (B-LC.L.V-20: 5581–5591). The subtext of these tales, however, appears to be a warning to men to leave pubescent girls alone. This ‘toxic masculinity’ is also embodied in the figure of !Khwa, who punishes girls who disobey the seclusion and dietary requirements for new maidens with abduction and death. Despite his moral ambiguity, the figure of !Khwa is ultimately concerned with decorous social behaviour. Strangely, De Prada-Samper pays relatively little attention to the menarcheal tales, on the basis that it is ‘ground already covered’ (De Prada-Samper 2018: 14). This seems unjustifiable, given that the tales of ‘new maidens’ are the /Xam stories in which !Khwa almost exclusively features, and are key to his character and nature. The alleged shamanic derivation of San thought, on the other hand, can reveal little or nothing of his identity.

One final point may be raised. Supporters of shamanistic readings of San folklore, including De Prada-Samper, tend to regard the rain as primarily concerned with what he calls ‘water as a physical element’ (see above), and with weather in a narrow sense. Yet the menarcheal tales alone suggest that !Khwa is a far more pervasive force. My suspicion is that he is more than just the incarnation of the rain and the storm; rather he may be a kind of overlord of the realm of the dead, and a figure of danger and retribution in a broader sense (cf. the Basarwa characterisation of Kaonxa as the master of ‘all the bad things’). Ultimately though, the character of !Khwa in /Xam thought can only be discerned from what they related concerning him; his nature is time- and place-specific.

Conclusion

There can be little doubt that the figure of !Khwa has not received the attention it is due. In my view, this is because his importance as a figure structurally comparable to the 'lesser god' of Khoisan lore generally has not been recognised and because the interpretations of Lewis-Williams and adherents to his hypothesis have focused inexorably on the centrality of shamanism and shamanic vision experiences as determinants of the content and forms of both narratives and visual art. An important outcome of the work by Hoff and De Prada-Samper has been the highlighting of the importance of the rain and water beings in recent lore. However, reading back from the materials collected in the last thirty years to the older materials is fraught with difficulties.

Before cultural continuities are claimed, further attention needs to be paid to premises and methods – rarely discussed specifically in Khoisan folklore research – as well as to evidence of culture change through time, inter- and intra-cultural diversity (as noted by Barnard) and differences in the lore of spatially separated groups. Only with such information can the significance of correlations and motif recurrences be assessed adequately. Motif matches may be evocative but their significance and demonstrable value – if any – requires further interrogation. In this regard, there is work still to be done on understanding the !Khwa of the /Xam testimonies. As I hope to have demonstrated here, different methods (including consideration of structural features rather than motifs) and interpretations (including rejection of the supposed relevance of shamanism) generates a somewhat different picture of !Khwa to that painted by De Prada-Samper and Lewis-Williams, amongst others.

Notes on orthography

With the exception of Nama-Dama (Namibian Khoekhoe), no Khoisan language has a standardised orthography (Menan Du Plessis, pers. comm.). I have elected to use the /Xam orthography devised by Bleek and Lloyd, with click consonants represented by a forward slash rather than the pipe symbol (a vertical stroke). I have, however, adapted the original orthography in one respect, namely the capitalisation of the first letter of proper names (e.g. !Khwa, /Kaggen), as is the convention in Nama-Dama.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Menan Du Plessis for advice on orthography and to Dr. Djordjina Trubarac-Matić for assistance in submitting my paper for publication. Alan Solomon provided invaluable help in the production of the map.

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Приче о кишама: Интерпретација водених бића у фолклору
јужноафричких Којсанаца и њихових потомака

Ен Соломон

Резиме

Важност кише и кишних животиња у знању јужноафричких народа који говоре бушманске и кхое језике добро је позната, нарочито посредством студија о пејинском сликарству. Слика воденог бика *!Khwa* ('вода') у усменим причама из 19. века народа Цхам отуд побуђује велико интересовање. Тумачење овог бића, посебно посредством недавних интервјуа с потомцима Којсанаца, доноси разне тешкоће. Закључци знатно зависе од метода које користе тумачи текста, и од претходно постојећих идеја о природи религијских веровања и праксе Бушмана (народа Сан). Овај рад предлаже другачије читање и приступ лику *!Khwa* у односу на оне које је дао Де Прада-Сампер (De Prada-Samper 2018) и наглашава потребу да се акрибичније приступи грађи, посебно с обзиром на методе и оцене историјског континуитета.

Кључне речи: Којсанци, Бушмани, усмене приче, киша, *!Khwa*, водена животиња, јужна Африка, ловци-сакупљачи

др Ен Соломон
самостални истраживач
Е-пошта: solomon.annec@gmail.com

Примљено: 19. 7. 2018.
Прихваћено: 22. 2. 2019.