

Research Article

KHOE-SAN ETHNOGRAPHY, 'NEW ANIMISM' AND THE INTERPRETATION OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN ROCK ART

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ABSTRACT

In 2007 Thomas Dowson argued that interpretation of southern African rock art was hamstrung by discussion of the significance and role of the shaman. Dowson offered an alternative approach in which he sought to resituate the shaman in an animic hunter-gatherer ontology. At the core of his argument, Dowson proposed that the control of supernatural potency was not the exclusive preserve of the shaman, and all humans and non-human animals circulated potency in activities that constituted their identities. Here I support Dowson's turn to anthropology and performativity, but question the mismatch between the broad-brush theory of animism Dowson applies and the actual details of Bushman ontology, their ideas of identity, their relationships with knowledge and the pragmatism and practicality that underpins their lives. I seek to re-orientate Dowson's interpretation towards a more characteristic representation of Bushmen than that inherent in unfamiliar ideas of circulating potency. Drawing on detailed ethnography and extensive fieldwork, I explore Dowson's proposal in terms of Bushman hunting, relationships with animals and god and the role and meaning of potency in their life. In a final section I assess the implications of these findings to the interpretation of southern African rock art.

Keywords: rock art, shamanism, Khoe-San, animism, potency.

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Dowson (2007) declared that a sea change in approach was needed in southern African rock art, to move nearly three decades of debate out of its current impasse. He attributed this, arguably still persistent bottleneck in discussion, to scholarly interpretation being locked into two polarised interpretive positions. On the one hand lie those who believe that the art represents very straightforward and familiar hunter-gatherer activities. On the other, lie those for whom it is overwhelmingly the work of shamans, loaded with shamanistic symbolism and metaphor, and representing a cultural construction of nature that enabled people to make sense of and to live in the world (Dowson 2007: 55). To Dowson's mind both interpretations are fundamentally flawed because they are rooted in an inappropriate Cartesian separation of humankind from the environment and they overstate the role of the shaman in the control of supernatural forces.

Dowson offers a two-step solution in which he seeks to eschew Cartesian principles and to resituate the shaman in an 'animic' (term is used following Dowson 2007) hunter-gatherer ontology. In his first step, Dowson builds on Ingold (2000) to assert that ancient and hunter-gatherer rock art should not be conceptualised as an early form of modern art that reflects the arrival of modern humans. Instead, the art should be recognised as the expression of intelligent people, carried out for their own reasons. In his second step, he proposes that, to understand the rock art of the Bushmen's ancestors, archaeologists should draw on insights from 'new animism', Bushman ethnography

and performativity theory. Dowson argues that, in the animic world of the Bushmen and their ancestors, all human and non-human animals were involved in maintaining the continued circulation of vital forces and they did this through "various activities that constituted human and non-human beings' identities" (Dowson 2007: 49).

Here I draw on detailed ethnography of the Bushmen (San) and culturally and linguistically related Khoekhoen, to question how appropriate Dowson's conclusions are. My analysis includes the Khoekhoen because the comparisons and continuities between these recent hunters and herders add greater insight to the issues discussed (Low 2008). I argue that Khoe-San details do not fit neatly into ideas of new animism, which are based on different ethnographic contexts. I propose that, if we are to use Bushmen to understand the ancient art, and there seems no better alternative, then we cannot rely on broad theory. Khoe-San ethnography indicates that Bushmen are not clearly animists and there is little evidence for the sort of circulation of potency ideas that Dowson identifies. I do, however, support Dowson's turn to anthropology and performance, and believe it right to look for the understanding of potency and meaning of the rock art scenes and motifs in the day-to-day life of Bushmen and not in an artificially separated shamanistic realm.

Like Dowson, I recognise potency as an everyday part of Khoe-San life, part of the cultural tapestry that underpins rock art. However, circulating potency, as Dowson conceives it, is not an idea that would be familiar to any Khoe-San I have encountered; nor does it relate well to the ethnographic literature. Some rock art scenes represent potency and supersensory phenomena associated with shamans, such as ethereal strings or flows of potency-rich sweat, but such themes, I suggest, are about working with connections perceived in the world and not world regeneration through potency circulation. Simultaneously, despite other scenes being more prosaic, I think it wrong to read potency out of any of the art. Indeed, one must recognise how issues of potency operate at all levels of Khoe-San life to truly comprehend the rich meanings inherent in seemingly mundane activities.

What makes Dowson's appraisal most problematic is that Khoe-San anthropology clearly highlights belief in a creator god ultimately responsible for everything. With belief in an omnipotent god the Bushmen do not need to circulate potency. Yet, nowhere does Dowson acknowledge, let alone take account of, the role of divinity in his animism. To present a convincing analysis Dowson really needs to write an historicised account of the meaning and role of Bushman gods and weigh this up against their ideas of potency and how it relates to Khoe-San egalitarian life and relationships with knowledge. To accomplish this is, however, a considerable task and beyond the possibilities of this paper. The most I can hope to achieve is to systematically work through Dowson's central argument whilst comparing his claims with my observations and the

wider ethnography. I begin by describing how Dowson's argument relates to new animism. I then present evidence for the role of god in Khoe-San life and discuss Khoe-San creation stories, moving on to key themes that Dowson uses to locate the Bushmen in the animistic discourse, i.e. avoidance behaviours, sympathy and respect for animals. In a final section I outline Khoe-San ontology and potency and examine Dowson's claims relative to relational epistemology and animism. Ultimately, I argue that his argument is too abstract; it relates poorly to what Bushmen actually think and do and leaves little room for the variety of ideas, behaviours and practices tolerated by, and intrinsic to, these pragmatic, egalitarian hunter-gatherers.

My interpretation comes from fourteen years of research on Khoe-San medicine from an historical, archaeological and anthropological perspective. The comparative findings of my work support ideas of continuity found in folklore (Schmidt 1989; Biesele 1993; Hoff 1997) and religion (Barnard 1992; Guenther 1999). My research has included over two and a half years amongst Khoe-San communities, principally the Nama, Damara, Hai//om, !Xun, Ju/'hoansi, Naro and ≠Khomani, supplemented with short visits to !Xo and Khwe. My methodology has included extensive interviews and participation in healing activities, including massage and healing dances.

NEW ANIMISM

'New animism' refers to the re-engagement of anthropologists with old 'animistic' themes in which historical ethnographers interpreted native peoples' conceptions of the natural world in terms of things imbued with humanlike spirit. New animism rejects these colonial, derogatory and ignorant assumptions of native simplicity for an overlapping set of themes captured by Harvey (2006), revolving around respect, morality, reciprocity, etiquette and responsiveness. Dowson's argument focuses on two particular strains of the animist discourse, drawing explicitly on Harvey (2006), Bird-David (1999), Pedersen (2001), Descola (1992, 1996) and Ingold (2000). The first strain concerns Bird-David's ideas of 'relational epistemology'. Using the Nayaka of India as an example, Bird-David posits that hunter-gatherer personhood is constituted in reciprocal interaction with others. Following Gibson, Bird-David describes that Nayaka knowledge of the world comes from being particularly attentive to the environment in what amounts to a 'conversational' manner. Nayaka do not just pick up information about the world, but are sensitive to how their presence in the world changes what they learn and they grow personally as a product of this relatedness: "It is expecting response and responding, growing into mutual responsiveness and, furthermore, possibly into mutual responsibilities" (Bird-David 1999: 577). The second strain is heavily influenced by Amerindian and Asiatic ethnography of shamanism and hunter-gatherers, developed within Ingold's and, implicitly, Viveiros de Castro's discussions of perspectivism.

Ingold characterises animists as people amongst whom "a fundamental division is always recognised" in how bodies are conceptualised, based on an internal "vital part that is the source of all awareness, memory, intention and feeling, and an exterior, bodily covering that provides the equipment and confers the powers that are necessary to conduct a particular form of life" (Ingold 2000: 123).

Animists share the notion that in mythopoeic time people and animals were the same. There then came a time of change when animals became animals and people became people. In Viveiros de Castro's (1998) notion of perspectivism, despite the hybridity of humanity's original condition, he determines that the original core, the internal vital part, was a social phenomenon

and as such essentially human. After the separation of people and animals, animals retained this essential human core but their animal form and role in the world became expressed with their outer body. As Viveiros de Castro describes, this presents a dilemma for animists because the boundaries between people and animals are not fixed and may blur to the point that a hunter might make the ultimate transgression of killing and eating a human being. To avoid this transgression requires performing shamanistic absolution, observing food taboos and sticking to a 'contract' of respect made in mythopoeic time. Ingold describes these sorts of ideas as a belief that animals offer their potentiality and substance to human beings so that humans may live. In return humans treat animals properly in death to ensure the release of life force and hence their subsequent reincarnation (Ingold 2000: 114).

Ingold (2000: 113) elaborates that the nature of the internal core distinguishes totemic Australian Aboriginals from animists. Aboriginals believe that the core of people and animals share the same creative force that came from the land when life was laid out in the Dreaming. Because Aboriginals believe relationships between animals and people were fixed in the Dreaming, hunting does not present them with the moral dilemma it poses for animists. Amongst Ingold's animists the powers that bring forth life are in the manifold beings who inhabit it. "Consequently, animate beings are engendered not by the land but reciprocally, by one another." They do not reveal the world that already exists but recognise life as an ongoing process of creation – "a complex network of reciprocal interdependence, based on the give and take of substance, care and vital force – the latter often envisaged as one or several kinds of spirit or soul" (Ingold 2000: 113).

This theoretical background serves as the foundation for Dowson's propositions that hunting is "an interpersonal dialogue between two sentient beings in the world: human and non-human animal". Hunting is not simply about procuring food but is world-renewing, "a skilled way of engaging with the world that ensures the circulation of supernatural forces" (Dowson 2007: 55–56). Dowson then goes further to suggest that not just hunting is renewing, but so too are other activities, including gathering and making rock art. Recruiting performativity theory, Dowson elaborates that such activities as healing, dancing, gathering or hunting were not simply actions people performed, they were "processes of engagement through which those people depicted in the rock art were constituted". It was the act of performance in these activities and in representing them in the art that made the Bushman ancestors who they were and ensured their on-going survival (Dowson 2007: 58). Dowson reveals the animistic crux of his argument in his assertion that: "The hunted provides food and sustenance, while the hunter ensures he and his community behaves respectfully towards this act of giving. Even a superficial reading of southern African hunter-gatherer ethnography reveals this is as true for them [Bushmen] as it is for any other hunter-gatherer" (Dowson 2007: 56).

I propose that the way Khoe-San peoples think about life, as an unfolding creative process underpinned by a flow of transformational force, is essentially animistic. At the same time though, we must recognise that if we swap god for an Aboriginal Dreaming type concept where the world was laid out, there is considerable overlap with that of the Khoe-San. Hunting holds no moral dilemma for the Bushmen because the relationship between animals and people was fixed by god. Furthermore, animals and people are engendered by god and the Bushmen are merely players in god's sometimes whimsical plan. If there is a 'contract', it is with god to behave and work

in the right manner and to reap the rewards of probability. They have no need to circulate potency to regenerate life. They do, however, need to work with potency, in a very pragmatic manner, to survive.

The moral dilemma that results from the idea that humans and animals share an ultimately human core, holds some resonance with Khoe-San thinking, but the distinction of inner and outer layers is too structured and rigid. Moreover, to propose that such clarity and consistency of thought exists rides roughshod over people characterised by memorate knowledge habits and open imaginative environments that leave plenty of space for idiosyncrasy. Surprisingly, Dowson's argument hinges almost entirely on evidence of "so-called avoidance behaviours associated with the hunt" (Dowson 2007: 56). Citing the anthropologist Mathias Guenther, Dowson proposes these avoidance behaviours indicate feelings of sympathy between San hunters and their prey and the "implicit recognition that the animal is a moral and sentient kindred being" (Dowson 2007: 56). Although Dowson is unclear as to exactly what avoidance behaviours he is referring to, the implication seems to be food taboos and possibly other hunting rituals. As we shall see, the avoidance behaviours flagged by Dowson are not related to moral dilemma, nor are they consistent. Furthermore, although sympathy and respect are significant in Khoe-San hunting, they are not so much spiritual ideas as pragmatic ways of working.

GOD AND THE 'SPIRIT CONTRACT'

Dowson claims that even a superficial reading of the ethnography reveals the animism inherent in Bushman life. What then are we to make of Lorna Marshall's assertion that: "The concepts found in many cultures – that animals have spirits that can be ritually addressed, that animals must be ritually appeased, or the killing atoned for – are lacking among the !Kung" (Marshall 1999: 144)? To understand Marshall's claims we need to look at Ju/'hoan creation stories. The Ju/'hoansi are the most thoroughly studied living Khoe-San group and research amongst them provides the most detailed insight into recent Bushman beliefs. First the great god ≠Gao N!a created himself and then the lesser god, //Gauwa. ≠Gao N!a then created wives for himself and //Gauwa, and the gods bore children. Next ≠Gao N!a created the earth, made holes for water, created water, the sky and things of the sky: rain, wind, lightning, sun, moon and stars. Finally he created the plants and animals, gave the animals their different forms and lastly created humans (Marshall 1999: 4).

This account reveals how first there were animals and then people. How then could animals be derived from a human core? The problem becomes all the more complicated when we compare this account with Khoe-San creation myths. Mathias Guenther describes 'First Order' animals becoming human, humans becoming animals and undifferentiated therianthropes becoming animal or human by losing or gaining the opposite characteristics (Guenther 1999: 69). In Guenther's terms the variability of these beliefs reflects the wider inchoate and flexible characteristic of Khoe-San thought; a notion supported by Megan Bieseles (pers. comm. 2013) an authority on Ju/'hoan folklore. Bieseles concludes that if Ju/'hoansi belief must be summarised, the indication is that people and animals were combined. However, she stresses that looking for a precise story of creation is a flawed exercise that misses the point. Giving voice to different ideas, sharing ideas and having space for different ideas, nuanced by personal character and experience, lies at the heart of what it means to be an egalitarian Ju/'hoansi hunter-gatherer.

Recent conversations with Ju/'hoansi regarding origins stories, revealed not only a complete unfamiliarity with such accounts across a wide age range, but variety in stories when they were known. Moreover, the Bushmen I encountered did not readily distinguish between creation as history or folklore. In a sense, the origin accounts were history given by the Old People but they were also 'just stories' because some people had not seen half-human/half-animal beings, although this did not preclude the possibility that such creatures might exist. Indeed, one man related how children had recently seen a horse with a leopard head near his village, Duin Pos. He believed this was possibly a 'First Order' animal. Notably, friends who laughed at this claim were reluctant to deny the possibility. They simply said they had never seen it. When people told creation stories the important theme was that, in the beginning, animals and people lived together in a world with no hunting. Different accounts then told of an eland wanting the hooves of either a horse or a giraffe because they sounded pleasing. The eland eventually runs off with the hooves refusing to give them back. At this point god realises that his plan is not working and he names the animals. Animals and people then become separated, all are given different languages and people become hunters.

The psychotherapist and anthropologist Bradford Keeney recounts similar Ju/'hoan creation stories. He (Keeney & Keeney 2013) describes an original state of 'First Creation', when the ancestors suffered no sickness or death. Bodies at this time were inherently unstable and kept shifting between human and animal forms. Then the ancestors first saw the light of the sun and that heralded a great 'turning around'. This introduced the phase of 'Second Creation' when people and animals were named. With the fixity of Second Creation came a loss of shape-shifting capacity and the commencement of sickness and death. Keeney elaborates that, despite the shift to Second Creation, the world of First Creation is not remote and lost forever from the Ju/'hoansi. Indeed, Bushmen actually seek the transformative power of First Creation in their healing dances, in which they learn to tremble and induce an unframed state of mind and a highly responsive body. In a way that flags the importance of sensual knowledge, Keeney determines that the dancing Bushman body, "sings felt truth rather than speaks interpretive discourse" (Keeney & Keeney 2013: 70). His analysis reinforces evidence that the original state of Bushmen was neither human nor animal. It emphasises that the Ju/'hoansi privilege experience and knowledge that 'comes to them', that they feel, above the second-hand experience and knowledge of others. Keeney seems to go as far as recognising that the creative force which Bushmen appreciate flowing **as nature**, is what they encourage within their bodies for its transformative potential, and this underpins their understanding of god. God is then a personified substantiation of the power behind life: transformation.

Examining Khoe-San creation myths alerts us to the importance of god in Khoe-San ontology. It is a presence that is evident in the everyday life and references of Khoe-San people. Although Christianity has long had an influence on many Khoe-San, it must be remembered that missionary work came surprisingly late and unevenly to many Bushmen. Moreover, Khoe-San relationships with structured religions remain surprisingly inchoate and idiosyncratic (Barnard 1992: 261–263; Low 2008: 116–117). There was notably little evidence of missionary contact amongst the Ju/'hoansi Marshall and Lee encountered in the 1950s and 1960s. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss pre-Christian belief, but it seems highly likely that belief in a god who started the world and, signifi-

cantly, runs the world, has distant roots, given the essential and universal nature of these beliefs across the Khoe-San.

Khoe-San creation stories recycle basic thematic building blocks, but there is considerable variety in how they are arranged. In view of this variety, it is misleading to try and pin down a rigid ontological account of how people relate to animals. Having said that, there is clear emphasis in Khoe-San folklore on a shift from a time when people and animals were the same, to a time when they were named and different. Khoe-San I have encountered are entirely clear that from the time of separation people hunted animals and that is just how it is, how god made the world.

SYMPATHY AND RESPECT IN AN ACT OF GIVING?

Dowson argues that Bushman hunters act respectfully towards an animal which gives itself to a hunter, citing as evidence Guenther's assertion that, "activated in each hunter is a feeling of sympathy" for a "moral and sentient kindred being" (Dowson 2007: 56). Addressing ideas of sympathy amongst the Khoe-San reveals a certain lack of clarity in discussion as two types of sympathy are conflated. There is sympathy as loyalty or compassion for a fellow quasi-human sentient animal. This reflects an ontology in which animals and people are linked. Then there is sympathy that is felt, which plays a role in hunting. The first is feeling as an expression of belief, the second is a harmony of body and experience. I propose that Guenther's assertion of loyalty sympathy, as cited by Dowson, is questionable, yet Guenther's actual text then elaborates this sympathy into the latter kind, which Guenther presents as a way of being that has evolved as part of successful hunting strategy. This latter kind of sympathy takes us nearer to understanding Khoe-San potency.

Of the numerous large-game hunting expeditions I have been on with Bushmen, none have actually resulted in a kill, which says much about the unpredictability of the enterprise. I have, however, witnessed killing of smaller animals, such as duiker, porcupine, springhare and monitor lizards. Amongst the smaller animals I have not seen any evidence of the sort of sympathy and respect implied by Dowson. Animals are dispatched without the least ceremony. Similarly, great excitement is often elicited at the prospect of driving down an animal and I have seen many domestic animals slaughtered with sometimes blunt instruments in an entirely matter of fact fashion. Elizabeth Marshall Thomas reveals an equally striking apparent lack of sympathy in an example concerning Ju//hoansi and a springbok shot in the gut. She reports how the young Ju//hoansi thought it hilarious that the animal kicked upwards as if something was biting her and the hunters commenced to imitate the suffering animal (Thomas 2006: 262). Similarly Heinz was struck by "the utter nonchalance" displayed by !Xo Bushmen who seized young ostrich chicks waddling after their parents, wrung their necks and threw them in his truck (Heinz 1979: 188).

It could be argued that these accounts reflect recent shifts in relationships with animals wherein dogs, guns or snares have removed the effort, involvement and intimacy of Bushman hunting. Whilst this is undoubtedly true, such a shift has greater implications for the larger game that demand considerably more effort from the hunter. However, given that large game kills seem equally pragmatic, I have little doubt that this unsentimental way of behaving is more characteristic of past behaviour than any reference to rituals, sympathy and spirit. Moreover, by contrast, despite other groups of hunter-gatherers experiencing similar social changes to those experienced by Bushmen, animistic principles prevail amongst them. One of many examples might be the 'animistic' behaviour of

Bear Heart, a North American Muskogee Indian, who describes making a circle in the air over a freshly killed squirrel to symbolise the circle of life (Bear Heart 1998: 23). At a kill he states an offering must be made to respect the animal and to honour the historical contract wherein people promised to kill only enough to survive and animals agreed to give themselves in the knowledge that Indians too will die and become part of the cycle of life.

Turning to the larger game animals that are granted such rich symbolic associations amongst the Bushmen, virtually none of the Bushmen I have encountered expressed empathetic sadness at killing except, intriguingly, at killing the eland. For example, despite elephants being said to be 'like humans', because they eat similar plants, many Ju//hoansi would be very happy to see elephants killed because they represent such a daily threat to their lives. Moreover, some Hai//om explained without the least indication of sympathy how they used to kill elephants by fashioning a spike in the lid of old oil drums. They would leave the drums on elephant paths. When elephants stepped on the spike and became unable to walk, the Hai//om killed them with spears.

In a scene from a documentary on the San, *The Great Dance*, a kudu is run down and speared (Foster & Foster 2000). In this sequence no special words are said or actions undertaken to give any suggestion of animistic contract or atonement. The exercise of killing and slaughtering is above all pragmatic, although charged with the effort and ultimate pleasure involved. Moreover, the hunters very clearly thank god for helping them catch the animal and they do this later around the fire. This thanking of god well after the kill highlights that first and foremost hunting is about skill. Secondly it is about whether god has helped or hindered the process. Whilst this filmed kudu kill gives no indication of sacred ritual there is, however, a short sequence of the hunter sprinkling sand on the kudu's body because, we are told, the kudu lived on the sand and the hunter tracked and killed it on the sand. Just before the kill we are also told that as the hunter draws in on the exhausted animal the kudu gives up. It becomes no longer wild and the hunter controls its mind. Reflecting on both these episodes leads us considerably nearer to what I believe lies at the heart of Bushman hunting.

It would be very easy to interpret the sand sprinkling as evidence that Bushmen are showing respect to nature. When I asked Bushman hunters what this action might mean, none of them had heard of it and they were unsure of its meaning. The ethnography is similarly mute on the matter. Much that is done by Bushmen is idiosyncratic and, even if commonly found, is done for varying reasons. Whilst discussing the matter some Ju//hoansi related that when they kill an antelope they might tap its belly with their bow or always commence slaughtering by removing meat from the base of the animal's neck. Their explanations for these practices were not in any sense sacred. Nor were they particularly thought through. Some simply said they had seen others do such things but did not know why they did it. Others told how they had themselves copied such acts, believing that it might improve their chances in the hunt. Others again were more articulate and related that they cut the neck meat because that was where an animal felt the 'wind' of the hunter. Removing this meat first from a carcass prevented antelope in the future from feeling the arrival of the hunter with the arrival of the hunter's wind. Behind these various explanations lay the recognition that the success of the hunt first and foremost relied on skill, and skill involves working with the event in ways that are thought, from experience, to affect the outcome. The act of sprinkling sand

was probably a specific way in which that hunter thought about how the tracks of the animal worked with the sand and connected him to his prey. Thinking of and working with tracks in this manner, as potent lines of connection, has considerable resonance with wider Khoe-San thought and practice.

The idea of working with what happens in life is equally important to understanding the film's claim that the hunter controlled the kudu's mind. This theme of game control resembles those of /Xam hunters who were said to control game animals and feel the animals in their body. In a following section I explore how ideas of control relate to Khoe-San ontology. In terms of sympathy, it is important to recognise how feelings of control relate to the feelings at work in the last moments of a kill, but equally, how at least living Bushman hunters, make no claims to being 'in the animal' or having any supernatural sounding, sympathetic, mind control abilities. My enquiries have repeatedly elicited such responses as "you cannot control an animal except farm animals" or, "you do not feel like the animal but your feelings do change when hunting. Your heart wakes up and you are excited" and "you cannot know what an animal is thinking".

One key to understanding ideas of animal control lies in hunters feeling that they are sharing something with the dying animal. However, as Ingold indicates, there is a difference between what happens in the hunt and how hunters recount the experience (Ingold 2000: 25). The very straightforward explanations I received suggest that Bushmen do not confuse the two, although commentators might. Killing an animal is an intimate moment but the sympathy is that of an attuned hunter desperate for a kill, firing on intuition and reaction. It is not sympathy born from empathetic compassion or supernatural bond. The only context when Khoe-San expressed anything like empathy was at the prospect of killing an eland because, they said, it is like a human, it cries when it is shot and looks to the sunset when it falls.

Guenther's evidence of creation stories does not give a clear account of human animal relations. Despite this he argues that deep down Bushmen think of animals as human and this acts as a moral restriction on over-hunting and abuse (Guenther 1988: 201). Guenther's 'moral restriction' implicitly taps into the idea that a hunter who kills an animal without showing the requisite respect will be avenged by the dead animal's spirit or a Lord of the Animals. But, as I have sought to demonstrate in the case of hunting rituals, there is little evidence for acts of respect or absolution performed at a kill to guard against revenge at the death of an animal. Thomas writes that Ju/'hoansi "gods were not seen as punitive parents or moral policemen". She believes Ju/'hoansi might fear the gods and doing wrong, but this was not related to divine doctrine, rather a "don't bother him, and he'll more or less leave you alone" attitude (Thomas 2006: 260).

Although there is a sense in which the creator god is a 'Lord of the Animals' because god decides which animals might be killed and which hunters are successful, this is not a special control but merely an aspect of god's omnipotence. There are rare instances when Ju/'hoansi ≠Gao N!a resembles a Lord of the Animals but they are the exception. Marshall observed that ≠Gao N!a is upset when bees are killed and might kill a person out of revenge, but emphasises that bees are special and this response is unusual. Similarly, she describes that ≠Gao N!a might take exception if he was shot and eaten when travelling in the form of a gemsbok. But, if ≠Gao N!a then killed the man in retribution, Marshall believes ≠Gao N!a would probably regret it when recognising that the man was only trying to feed his children (Marshall 1999: 31). The only significant evidence

that some Bushmen might believe in a Lord of the Animals features in Köhler's 1971 account of the Kxoe (Kxwe). However, despite his citing the phrase, close inspection reveals that Köhler is not describing the sort of notion found in animism. His account distinguishes hunting which is profane, from that which is ritual. Such a division would be impossible if the act of killing *per se* required ritual absolution. As in his accounts of Kxoe healing, Köhler writes in a rather old-fashioned manner that makes familiar Khoe-San material look different. He describes that the great god Kxyani allows animals to be killed and hunters to be successful – representing not a protective animal Lord, but a god that holds life on a whim.

In terms of a human-animal sympathy restricting over-hunting and abuse, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that Bushmen treat animals in ways that would count as abuse to many Western people. Whilst Bushmen do not typically take pleasure in killing or kill more than they have to, their relationships with animals testify to the everyday nature of hunting and killing animals balanced with the effort it involves. Elderly Bushmen described clearly that they used to hunt until there was nothing left and then they would move on. Some explained that they would not kill certain ages or genders of animals because this would affect future numbers, but such claims are far from representative and often hold a hint of recent conservation policy. Similarly, some explained that they would leave enough of a plant for it to survive, but such actions seemed entirely pragmatic and had no bearing on fulfilling a contract with nature or divinity. I have encountered some Khoe-San who leave a token when they pick part of a plant, but this is to ensure the plant will work for them. Where these ideas exist it seems quite possible that they might also be borrowed from their Herero neighbours amongst whom it is common practice.

Whilst I find it hard to recognise Guenther's moral restriction on killing and implication of benign ecological stewardship, his analysis of hunting sympathy brings considerable insight to ideas of potency. Guenther determines that knowledge generates the empirical requisite information of hunting whilst sympathetic identification "contributes towards the embedding of the animal in the hunter's consciousness, which allows for intense and persistent inner concentration" (Guenther 1988: 201). I think he is right to recognise this working with sympathy as a hunting technique. A similar phenomenon underpins Khoe-San medical practice when what is sensually detected is interpreted as the flow of potency. I am not, however, convinced that what is, in effect, listening to and working with feelings, is an expression of a moral and spiritual affinity that speaks of an unspecified higher code. Guenther determines that amongst the Naro certain hunters were especially skilled at hunting particular species because of their moral and spiritual affinity to them. But, if this affinity is rooted in ontology, why would some hunters have more affinity with particular animals than others? Why would some be good ostrich hunters and others good springbok hunters?

To answer this question we need to understand what affinity means, how it relates to the spirit and how that affinity might vary. To do so requires taking a careful look at Khoe-San ideas of personhood and spirit. Before this, though, we must first address Dowson's use of Guenther's ideas to claim that Bushmen are animists on the basis of their hunting avoidance behaviours. The fear of eating one's kin is thought to underpin animistic relationships with animals. Guenther (1988: 193) partly roots his interpretation that, for Bushmen, meat holds the dangers of being human, in an explicit /Xam claim that they did not eat hare because the hare was once human. Amongst

the ≠Khomani some people eat hare and some do not because, they say, hares menstruate, like a woman. This alternative explanation immediately alerts us to the variety of understanding inherent in food avoidances and the reasoning, or lack of it, behind them. Some Khoe-San eat elephant and some do not. Only some refuse to eat elephant because they were once people. Others simply say the Old People did not show them that, or that elephant meat makes them sick; 'it does not go with them'.

Food avoidances are not consistent across the Khoe-San nor even amongst adjacent village groups. Why some people can eat certain foods whilst others cannot relates almost entirely to what they believe is safe to eat. Although sickness is ultimately said to come from god and dead people, food avoidance balances pragmatism with Khoe-San concepts of identity. If someone tries food and feels sick afterwards, in ways both profound and straightforward, this tells them that they are not the sort of person that can eat that food. It does not 'go with them', although it might be fine for others. In a very pragmatic sense an entire Ju//hoan village refused to eat python because a village man had nearly died from trying it in the recent past. At the same time, Ju//hoansi in an adjacent village were entirely happy to eat python. Juggling ideas of smell, potency and practical experience, some people say they cannot eat ostrich or zebra because they are 'too smelly', whilst others eat them. The food avoidance associated with young and old being able to eat different parts of an animal kill, is all about negotiating the same sort of potent properties of an animal that lead to its use in 'medical' or hunting practices. For example, young children must be 'introduced' to eland chest meat by being smeared with eland broth at an age when they are strong enough. This prevents them from developing a possibly fatal cough from eating the potent chest meat. Wearing a necklace of eland skin is a different way of making children safe from potent 'eland wind'. Such reasons for not eating food strongly indicate that Bushman food avoidance has little to do with animistic 'contracts' with nature. To understand the background of food avoidances we must take a closer look at ideas of identity and being 'introduced' to life.

KHOE-SAN ONTOLOGY AND POTENCY

Ramos (2012) criticised Viveiros de Castro for generalising his animistic perspectivism too far beyond his South American context of expertise. The warning is equally pertinent to applying broad-brush animism across continents. Comparing Dowson's animistic model to the Khoe-San reveals significant ways in which the model fits but equally highlights considerable disjuncture. Whilst some level of misfit must be expected in any model, what is striking is that the reason the Khoe-San do not fit, can be attributed to their flexible, 'fuzzy', memorate and egalitarian ways of thinking and being. As these are archetypal characteristics of hunter-gatherers, the Khoe-San misfit raises the question of how appropriate the model might be for other hunter-gatherers. Both Viveiros de Castro (1998) and Ingold (2000) propose that people called animists believe the internal core of human and animals is essentially human, whilst the external body is the equipment that defines how an organism performs in the world. Ingold (2000: 123) elaborates that the internal vital part of an organism is the source of awareness, intention, memory and feeling.

Khoe-San people work with distinctions of inner spirit and external form and function but such a simple internal/external model as this fails to capture the nuance of their ontology and the fluidity of their epistemology. As these factors underpin Khoe-San ways of 'being in relationship', a cornerstone of the

animistic model, they are not something that should be easily brushed over. Lorna Marshall describes that the Ju//hoansi god created animals as animals and human beings as human beings. He then "commanded them to breathe. Without breath they would not live". Elsewhere she elaborated that the spirit *n/*, is like breath or air (Marshall 1999: 19, 27). Amongst the Khoe-San wind and breath is used as a way of talking about the god-given breath of life that ultimately defines what an organism is. Wind is an organism's 'essence' that equates to what an organism can do, or its potency. Ideas of wind serve as an invisible form of connection and lie behind how the potency of one organism is thought to enter another. Notions of wind overlap and underpin other means in which potency is thought to move between organisms and the wider environment, particularly including smell and sweat but also shadows, harmful thoughts and words, staring, pointing or coming into contact with an object touched by a potent person. 'Strong wind' equates to good and bad medicine; it can heal and encourage vitality or it can cause sickness and kill. Contrary to what we might expect, the Khoe-San do not associate wind particularly with the lungs. As the essence of life and personality, wind is located in the heart and head. As the divine gift that distinguishes the dead from the living, wind also runs in the blood and blood vessels and is thought by many to be the motive power in the body. Others believe wind runs in the tendons.

Khoe-San concepts of the human life cycle are intimately tied to environmental potency. From before birth a person is defined by environmental interaction, starting with an agitated mother or one who encounters 'strong smelling' people risking harm to her foetus. At the time of birth the relationship of the weather to the birth is noted and people are said to have influence on that sort of weather throughout their life. Amongst the Ju//hoansi this phenomenon is known as *!now*, whilst Khoe speakers recognise people as *tuxa* and *tu//kho*. *Tuxa* comprises the word *tu*, 'rain' and the postpositional *xa*, denoting 'full of', or 'ownership' of rain. A *tuxa* person is born in rain times and can bring rain by throwing fat or their own hair in a fire. A *tu//kho* person, born during dry periods, can similarly stop rain with the same action (Haacke & Eiseb 2002: 134). As babies develop they are introduced to the dangerous things of life so that they can establish a relationship. Having a relationship sets up a 'do not harm me I am one of you' kinship, and the possibility of negotiating with the phenomenon a person is related to. Nama children are introduced to their first food using the powerful medicine of the ostrich egg. The Ju//hoansi wash young children in the rain to introduce them to the rain. Girls reaching menarche are introduced to the rain and young people are introduced to eland chest meat.

Khoe-San ideas of who a person is and what they can do are determined by these sorts of incidental and formalised introductions and there is a sense in which these become built into their wind-identity. In broader contexts personal winds equate to ideas of gifts or talents that a person has and many of these are simply recognised through experience: 'he is a lucky sort of person; he has that luck thing'. In healing and hunting contexts, particular strengths or abilities are deliberately put into people. Across the Khoe-San, for example, young children wear necklaces of kudu skin that give them the wind of these animals and make them strong. Or, amongst the Damara, a lightning strike confers */nanu aob*, rain wind, and makes a person a strong healer. Amongst the Ju//hoansi invisible 'arrows' or 'thorns' are put into people as a form of *n/om*, to give them the ability to heal. These are a variation of */gais*, */gabas* and */gauas*, wind-spirit ideas found amongst Khoe speakers. In hunting

contexts people have the strong tendons of animals rubbed into cuts they make in their biceps to make their bow arm strong or they might rub plants into cuts around the eyes so that they can 'see well'.

In perspectivism's idea of organisms being definable in terms of an inner and outer shell, the notion of these talents, winds, spirits or *n/om* potency is problematic because they make up who a person is and they live all over the body, flow through the body, in blood, and move between bodies as wind. Moreover, a person can be given the wind of an animal in a sense that that animal becomes a part of them. It lives inside them and confers a kinship relationship. Khoe-San 'snake doctors', for example, take the poison of snakes so that they have the wind of the snake, are in a sense a snake, and will not therefore be harmed by snakes. The identity of a person is therefore spread across the body, in the different places talents and wind live and flow and different parts of a body are considered to hold the entire essence of an organism. This is apparent in the use of different animal parts from the same animal all being thought to hold that animal's potency. Hence, children might be given eland wind by using eland skin, eland flesh or eland hooves. The essence of a person is also thought to flow in their sweat, sometimes in their urine and spittle and ultimately in their smell or wind as something that wafts from inside them, across space, into another.

Understanding what makes up a person and how people are linked to the world has considerable bearing on what sympathy with animals might mean in Khoe-San contexts. At the same time it alerts us to the important space given to feeling, observing and reacting in Khoe-San life. The /Xam archive provides examples of people who were said to 'own' an animal, such as a springbok. This sort of 'ownership' or 'mastership' is the meaning inherent in owning gifts, luck, hunting abilities or healing strengths that is found amongst contemporary Khoe-San. It is accordingly highly probable that the /Xam, like other Khoe-San, thought of such ownership in terms of being either the sort of person given that gift of, for example, hunting springbok, by god, or they were deliberately given that gift by bringing themselves into association with the animal. This might have been done through rubbing a part of the animal into their skin or wearing a part of the animal, such as a springbok cap. Like the snake doctor who knows he has 'that gift' because snakes always run from him, a hunter may know he has that gift because animals seem to behave in a particular, predictable fashion when he approaches them. This is a similar idea to that posed by Thackeray. Thackeray (2005) suggests that /Xam interpreted the inquisitive behaviour of an animal coming towards the hunter, as the hunter's potency. In a similar way I knew an old Damara lady who could poleaxe a rock hyrax by pointing at it. She had that gift.

RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND POTENCY

Bird-David (1999: 577) proposes that hunter-gatherers are engaged in a conversation with the world. Contrastingly, Khoe-San relationships with the environment seem less conversational than receptive, albeit in a manner that takes account of the effect of their presence, meaning that they keep listening. Rather than expecting a response from the environment, I believe it is more accurate to say Khoe-San are listening and responding. Their disposition of 'What is this trying to tell me?' opens up their sensitivity to the environment and the opportunity or dangers it holds. The difference between talking and listening is a shift in emphasis from a rather abstract notion of people reconstituting themselves and the world through everyday life, which seems poorly related to what people actually

say and think, to a more pragmatic sensually orientated use of the world. A 'listening disposition' gives better account of Khoe-San explanations and relationships with the body.

Keeney and Keeney (2013: 70) pointed to the felt truth Bushmen seek through dancing. Hunting, like healing, entails an opening up of the responsive self where action predominates over thought. Sensations come to the body, sometimes as if from nowhere, and the body responds. The more a person lets go in these conditions the more they can exploit the muscle memory and uninhibited skill lying, potentially, within them. Like other hunter-gatherers the Khoe-San do not regard intuition, feelings and possibly dreams as distortions of reality. Instead they serve as revelations of the real nature of the world that guide their empirical hunting and wider living skills. Khoe-San orientation to the world is sensuously mindful in a way that dissolves any hierarchical distinction of mind, brain and body. Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2004: 208) describe that on the death of an eland Ju/'hoansi shaman like to dance in the animal's radiated potency.

Whilst this is in a sense true, hunters I have met would have to be pushed to say any more than they are dancing for joy. A Bushman hunter's joy embraces the charged release of emotion that accompanies a kill. It embraces the exertion and the smells of themselves and the animal that speak of the potency at work. Their actions celebrate the benefits of potency – the good eating – whilst guarding against the dangers of potency – the jealousy that might ensue if the meat is not shared or a hunter becomes arrogant. To understand potency it is important to remember that it is not a spiritual substance, but a phenomenon that is efficacious; although at times it can be substantiated. Similarly to Keesing's appraisal of Polynesian *mana*, 'things' are potent because they make something happen – "they work" (Keesing 1984: 138). A Ju/'hoansi hunter related that eland have *n/om* potency because some can and some cannot eat its meat. In Outjo there is a Hai//om man who can change into a snake. He was born a *soxa* person. *Soxa* and *n/om* are two of a number of Khoe-San terms, all related to significant action, that are pulled into the imposed category of potency. Amongst the Khoe-San it is more interesting to know how things work together and what the outcome might be than to ask why.

The way Khoe-San think through ideas of 'talents', wind and smell and invisible arrows, which are the vehicles and substantiated expressions of potency, allows people to work with potency in their everyday lives. Accordingly, healing potency of an animal can be put into a child, or, because agamid lizards point at oncoming rain, they are thought to 'go with' rain and are able to call the rain.

The way Khoe-San are sensitively attuned to looking for relationships of how life 'works' in a 'go together' fashion, relates strongly to what seems a shared human proclivity of looking for patterns. Like the majority of Western people, the Khoe-San seem prey to what cognitive scientists have identified as "a natural tendency to look only for corroboration in the world" or "the confirmation bias". In his study of probability, Nicholas Taleb frames this as an error of thinking. As Taleb notes, once the mind "is inhabited with a certain view of the world" people tend only to consider instances that prove them right. Taleb elaborates that seeing patterns of causation in this way seems attributable to the function of L-dopa, a chemical produced within the human body (Taleb 2007: 58–69). In Khoe-San contexts patterns are not only seen but felt and what they locate at the heart of those patterns is the evidence of life as a transformational force. Where that force manifests is where they see particular potency. Being sensitive to patterns in the world and recognising not always familiar associations

across space and time locates the Khoe-San in a distinctively nuanced understanding of the world. That such hunter-gatherers survive is testament to the overall effectiveness of pattern recognition as part of our shared biological, psychological and somatic evolution in the world.

CONCLUSION

In seeking to characterise the Khoe-San, it is not possible simply to say they are or are not animists. Their belief in a permeating vital force looks thoroughly animistic but the force happens to be thought of as god. Their sentient ecology is typical of that found amongst people called animists but they have no beliefs in a Lord of the Animals they must propitiate when killing game. Khoe-San ideas of wind as an all permeating vital force, both inchoate but sometimes substantiated, seem essentially animistic but at the same time do not neatly fit ideas of people and animals having an internal core and external shell. Amongst Khoe-San the core and wider body is a mixture of divine creative power, god-given or acquired talents and spirit or wind gifts that bestow relationships with animals, the weather or other environmental phenomena. Ingold observes that hunter-gatherers who believe in a permeating vital force use tactics to keep that force alive. Some wear masks that displace the human shell, opening them up to the core they share with animals. Others tie small animal forms to their clothing and carve animals in a bid to keep them in mind and maintain their hunting bond (Ingold 2000: 125–127). It is notable that the Khoe-San do neither of these things. Like Australian Aboriginals the Khoe-San do not need to keep the world alive by wearing animals, carving animals, honouring ‘a contract’ or making rock art. The world is as it is because the creator made it that way. Luck, success, pain and death are explained by the whim of the creator.

Unlike the animists that underpin Dowson’s argument, amongst Khoe-San the power that brings forth life is not in the manifold beings who inhabit it but in the creator. Animate beings are not engendered by one another but by god. The Khoe-San work with a world that exists regardless of themselves. They recognise complex networks of reciprocity in the nature of life but they view these in very pragmatic terms of how things work together. Reality teaches, given their ways of knowing, that this interdependence is founded in potency flow. The Bushmen have learnt how to work with the potency of life but conscious or unconscious ideas of circulating potency are notably absent. Although Dowson recognises that flexibility in Khoe-San thought is something archaeologists have taken little note of in their interpretative endeavours, he seems reluctant to give adequate space for this flexibility in his interpretation of their art. Asserting that the art is all about the circulation of potency seems more a ‘third way’ than a sea change. What seems more appropriate is setting out a spectrum of behaviour, beliefs and conscious application out of which different art was produced in different historical and social contexts.

As the heart of egalitarian Bushman behaviour lies in giving space for the individual, the role of the individual and the individual’s shifting role must surely be prioritised in interpretation of the art. Furthermore, it is very striking that many Khoe-San act more on feelings than detailed explanation. We should not ignore the fact that many people do things because they ‘feel like it’. Some of the art must therefore be given a rather non-rationalised everyday quality. Whilst giving room for relatively undirected production of art is important, just as important is recognising how other art no doubt came from a much more focussed desire. As the content of much of the art concerns therianthrope forms, potency rich animals or lines

suggestive of potency, it seems reasonable to suggest that some artists were more committed than others to working with potency to establish or reinforce connections of power in the world, like working with tracks of an animal to affect the animal. It is equally probable that some motifs were produced as a means of securing or manipulating personal or group power and status.

Taken together, these various types of practice represent a spectrum from more everyday representation to potency rich scenes and motifs. There is, however, a further aspect to this spectrum. Given the attention Khoe-San pay to sensory knowledge and the significance of what Ingold (2000) terms ‘enskilment’ as a way of knowing and doing, Dowson’s emphasis on performance as a key element behind the production of southern African art is to be thoroughly welcomed. Yet, rather than linking the art to performativity and the idea that potency requires deliberate circulation, what seems more appropriate, is recognising that the performance of art opens up an unframed space in which images can appear as if from beyond the mind of the artist. A proportion of rock art must represent people exploring their feelings, perhaps even in the same way that people doodle. To doodle is to enjoy the sensation of our life within, exploring itself. What is doodled seems to hold special salience, like a message from somewhere else – perhaps the transformative powers of god and First Creation. There is then a sense in which making art resembles the hunting of *n/om* in a healing dance. It is a way of touching the power, truth and vitality of god and First Creation. Like summoning *n/om*, making art is a feeling.

Bearing this aspect of art production in mind, alongside the complex way in which Khoe-San work with the patterns they perceive in the world, from the cradle to the cooking pot, even the most mundane looking scenes are all about potency – but some scenes are clearly more about potency than others. The question Dowson ultimately leaves me with is not whether or not the art is about potency, but what the difference is between talk of god and the religious scaffolding this implies, and recognising god as transformation – the power of growth and life in the world and the feeling of life imminent within.

It is problematic that Dowson blurs an account of animism as a way of being, which is highly appropriate to the Khoe-San, with a search for meaning in rock art, without reference to the ways in which meaning emerges, is transformed and worked with in Bushman life. Ingold’s more recent work shifts emphasis from a body as internal and external spheres into an organism as a meshwork “in a tissue of trails that together comprise the texture of the lifeworld” (Ingold 2011: 69–70). This notion of an organism as an expression of life, entangled in the matrix that engenders its unfolding and progression, is particularly appropriate to the Khoe-San with their flowing ideas of breath, wind, smell, ‘spirit essence’ and arrows. To understand the rock art of the Bushman ancestors we should couple this sort of interpretation to the pragmatic Khoe-San approach to life in which god stands as the ultimate omnipotent explanation. And, if we are to take any account of what it means to be not only a modern hunter-gatherer but a modern human, we cannot ignore the multiple meanings inherent in the art. We must be aware of the thinking, sensual and reflective body and wary of looking for any more clarity or singularity in reasoning and practice in the past than exists amongst contemporary peoples, Bushmen and non-Bushmen alike.

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