

Birds in the life of KhoeSan; With Particular Reference to Healing and Ostriches

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Abstract

The paper examines birds within the everyday and healing life of recent and historical KhoeSan of southern Africa. Following a brief review of academic interest in KhoeSan bird knowledge and evidence for the recent social salience of birds, I describe how KhoeSan exhibit a ‘listening disposition’ or a particularly tuned awareness to their environment, within which birds are accorded certain kinds of significance. The second half of the paper links this significance to how and why birds are used in medicine. I draw particular attention to the widespread use of the ostrich and, drawing on historical ethnography and recent anthropological findings, attribute this to its potent qualities. The paper argues for subtlety in delineating and understanding KhoeSan relationships with birds. In particular it highlights the dangers of approaching analysis through familiar ‘Western’ categories of enquiry.

Keywords: KhoeSan, birds, historical ethnography, anthropology

Our land is our mother. It has brought us up and so gave us life. When you wake up in the Kalahari you hear the birds in the trees as they stir and sing to a new day. You hear the

powerful wings of the dove as it flies off to drink water. And as you walk outside, the rain and wind touches your heart (Hardbattle in Saugestad 2001:212).

John Hardbattle was co-founder of the Botswanan Bushman activist organisation 'First People of the Kalahari'. He was son of a half-Bushman mother, Khwa, whose language he spoke fluently, and an English father, Tom. Tom had travelled to Africa in 1899 and by 1920 bought a cattle farm in Ghanzi (Gall 2001:172)¹. John Hardbattle's narrative of approximately 2000 words, from which my epigraph is taken, is a deliberate attempt to capture truths, value, and meaning about 'traditional' Kalahari Bushman life. As a piece of advocacy, John's writing is polemical, romantic, and essentialist. Nevertheless, realities of life in the Kalahari are made up of particularly striking ingredients. For John the essence of Bushman life lay in environmental relationships, particularly Bushman life with birds. His narrative is striking because it relates so many of the key phenomenological and ideational themes that inform my work on KhoeSan medicine².

The introductory paragraph begins with the songs of birds and moves on to the sound-scape of doves' wings. In the subsequent narrative, amongst other references to birds, Hardbattle claims that 'God gave us the Kori Bustard' and, further on, that ostrich beads represent wealth to the Naro (Saugestad 2001:212,214). Hardbattle's emphasis on birds might be surprising in view of their relatively poor representation in Bushman rock art and academic accounts of Bushman life and beliefs. As we shall see, though, birds lie at the core of Bushman and Nama and Damara origin beliefs and everyday life alike, and considering birds leads us to key facets of KhoeSan ontology and epistemology.

¹ See also <http://kalaharisunset.com/history.html>.

² I use KhoeSan as a derivative of the European word 'Khoisan'. Khoisan is a useful way of referring to the culturally affiliated Khoekhoegowab speaking peoples and non Khoekhoegowab speaking Bushmen groups. KhoeSan updates the now old-fashioned spelling of 'Khoi' to 'Khoe'. Capitalizing the 's' is an attempt to emphasize the political equality of the two groups.

In this account I hope to give an impression of how recent KhoeSan have lived with birds and how bird relationships feed into the KhoeSan healing world and have done so in historical, if not pre-historical, times. At the core of my perspective lies an idea that I develop from Gibson's 'education of attention'. I term it a 'listening disposition'. I envisage this characteristic as something intrinsic to all people but particularly those who are sensitively tuned to local 'nature' and rural social African life amongst the KhoeSan, as distinct from those from beyond the region and those who are far more embedded in the formal economy and, most importantly, in imposed Western education practices. On the coat tails of Hardbattle and building on Bieseles ideas of environmentally and culturally situated continuity, I relate this listening disposition to birds by exploring themes of song and behaviour and the particular relevance of big birds, the kori bustard and the ostrich. I develop my interpretation in terms of how birds move in and out of people both in a somatic sense and as mediators between the material and immaterial or 'spiritual' domains of life.

My discussion uses specific examples drawn from my long-term regional comparison of a variety of KhoeSan peoples ranging across Namibia, western Botswana and South Africa's Northern Cape. During 2001 and 2007/2008, I carried out two years of fieldwork, including oral history and participant observation, amongst Nama, Damara, Hai//om, Ju'hoansi, Naro, and Khomani. The methodological validity of my regional comparison draws on Alan Barnard's *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa* (1992). Within his 'regional structural comparison', Barnard highlights the validity of considering the 'Khoisan' as a useful and distinctive category of enquiry based on cultural continuities. My findings regarding KhoeSan medicine have furthermore overlapped with Barnard's consideration of KhoeSan religion, and my research very much supports his identification of structure and fluidity across the region (Barnard 1988), a phenomenon further indicated in Schmidt's work on KhoeSan folklore. Despite the historical and geographical variety of settings, Schmidt demonstrates the recurrence across the region of the same or very similar beings, stories, cosmology, and trickster-related inversions of the everyday (Schmidt 1986 & 1989). Megan Bieseles has recognised a similar continuity in Bushman folklore but argues further for a historical dimension. By analysing nineteenth-century ethnography alongside her own research,

Biesele demonstrates that, despite linguistic divisions, ‘a thousand miles of Africa and a century of time’, the narrative framework of particular stories persists (Biesele 1993:3). Biesele partly accounts for this continuity by proposing the existence of a persistent ‘imaginative substrate’, a way of thinking about and working with life that is founded on long and profound relationships with the environment and related strategies of resource use (Biesele 1993:13). Biesele suggests that ideational continuities, linked to continuities in a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, might validate pushing current aspects of Bushman life back into distant centuries. The archaeologist David Lewis-Williams has made further influential claims for envisaging ritual and ideational continuities across Bushmen of southern Africa for thousands of years (Lewis-Williams 1984). He has based this on perceived cultural continuities between historical rock art across southern Africa, nineteenth century ethnography of /Xam Bushmen, and elements of recent Bushman trance dancing.

Academics have recognised that continuities in environment and experience lead to continuities in regional practices, beliefs, strategies, and responses (Carruthers 2003:258; Feierman 2006:187; Omofolabo 1996:182). In this paper I build on these broader arguments for continuity and the more specific findings of Barnard, Biesele, Lewis-Williams, and Schmidt to try and present key themes of KhoeSan bird relationships supplemented by localised variations and understandings where they add to both the bigger and the smaller picture. I propose that one can extend a regional ‘grammar of understanding’ to KhoeSan animal relations; in other words, that people relate to animals in like ways and share persistent knowledge, stories, and beliefs concerning animals. At the core of this regional continuity lie ideas of animal personhood. Without supporting a simplistic and naïve notion of a clear dichotomy between educated urban and rural ‘traditional’ KhoeSan, I assert that the KhoeSan I encountered in rural areas relate overwhelmingly to animals as organisms granted personhood. Ingold’s account of hunter-gatherer relationships ‘in’ nature most aptly captures KhoeSan relationships with birds. Ingold has observed that one must distinguish hunter-gatherer relationships in nature from the ontological dualism of the nature/society and animal/human ‘Western’ intellectual tradition. To hunter-gatherers, many phenomena, including rain and animals, are considered to be like people. They act intelligently, wilfully, and idiosyncratically. When encountering

animals, KhoeSan, like other hunter-gatherers, will ask ‘who did it’ and ‘why’ rather than ‘how does that work’. Whilst awareness of differences exist, to meet a bird is to meet not an ontologically separate organism but a related organism-person (Ingold 2000:48-72).

Despite the geographical, socio-economic, and historical variety that underscores KhoeSan life, fundamental continuities have persisted in KhoeSan relationships with the environment. This continuity is ably represented by the prescience of the eland in historical Bushman life, from the Western Cape nineteenth-century /Xam ethnography and the possibly ancient rock art of the Drakensburg to the readily articulated special status of the eland in the lives and thoughts of recent Hai//om, Ju/'hoansi, and ≠Khomani. This is more than coincidence. In a related sense, the Nama and Damara similarly utilise the eland as a particularly powerful animal in their medicines. As we shall see, this sort of continuity is played out in relationships with birds.

In response to criticism of his suggestion that ideas and practices might be ‘pan-San’, Lewis-Williams has drawn attention to the fact that this statement does not preclude these beliefs being shared with non-San in southern Africa (Lewis-Williams 1998:86). Similarly, many of the notions I identify here within KhoeSan rubrics might well apply to KhoeSan neighbours. What perhaps needs highlighting (considering anthropologists’ current preoccupation with problematising cultural boundaries and wariness of essentialising) is that a regional study such as this sets out to delineate useful frames of reference from which one can develop further useful fields of study³. The challenge remains how to describe patterns whilst providing accurate and contextualized detail.

In this paper I have chosen to try and best represent the feel of KhoeSan bird relationships by moving between a broad range of examples. I realize that by doing so I risk accusations of essentialism and historical, environmental, and social decontextualisation. However, I am deliberately using this old-style Frazer (1911) or Schapera (1930) looking approach as a device for capturing what I perceive as fundamental commonalities in ways of thinking and relationships with both environment and knowledge. The cross-KhoeSan commonalities I point towards are based on continuities of experience and ways of working with that experience. As I have explored

³ For problems of boundaries and essentialising see Bashkow (2004).

elsewhere (Low 2008:46), I see KhoeSan cultural continuity not in terms of continuity in absolute details but as persistent themes often involving the same or very similar details framed in local contexts and ebbing and fluxing through time. I have suggested such continuity might be likened to a patchwork quilt that maintains its appearance although individual patches are worn out and replaced with patch segments similar enough for the quilt to maintain its pattern or identity.

One particularly important theme of KhoeSan bird relationships concerns their potent and, in Turner's terms, 'liminal' status. In his work on Ndembu ritual Victor Turner ([1969]1995) suggests that anomalies, or things that do not fit normal conventions and constraints, hold the power to articulate some of the profoundest knowledge within human societies. The betwixt and between quality of liminal events is essential to movement of birds from the periphery to the centre of one's focus. This characteristic of bird arrival is attributed a meaningful status by KhoeSan, predominantly in contexts of birds as messengers, and, in this respect at least, many KhoeSan ideas of birds map closely with those found in all manner of human cultures recent and ancient. Nadia Lovell provides an insightful explanation of how such commonality and longevity might be understood:

certain features of the natural environment seem to be acted upon universally, not so much because they act as archetypes (in a Jungian sense) but rather because human sociality appears to focus ontologically on certain key features of the environment which become conducive to the emergence and development of social praxis (Lovell 1998:72).

Thinking about birds provides a good example of exactly why and how the environment might be arresting cross-culturally. Particularly in terms of a 'listening disposition', birds are distinctively interactive in their character, which goes some way to explaining why the way they mingle with humans, in mind and body, is exceptional. Many birds seem inquisitive as they arrive, sometimes as if from nowhere, and insert themselves into our conscious space. Their behaviour and their voices can demand attention, and it is undeniable that, particularly in semi-desert terrain that characterises so much of KhoeSan life, their apparent investment seems meaningful in a profoundly

interactive manner. Like a whirlwind that comes from nowhere and runs through your hut, the only hut for a considerable distance in an ‘empty’ landscape, birds demand attention in a way many other animals or phenomena do not. In terrain which is often quiet, birds are striking companions; some of the Kalahari birds are amongst the most striking for their behaviour, colouring, and size.

Amongst the KhoeSan, animals and other phenomena, such as thunder, are humanised or, more accurately, given personal will that can intercede in everyday life and may become embedded in people and hence fully human. Many KhoeSan are aware, although in slightly different ways and to different extents, that natural phenomena can become part of people. Birds, or bird qualities, can become part of a person. To most KhoeSan the world is not bound in scientific cause-and-effect principles but lived by people who are sensually and psychologically attuned to both its ‘giving’ nature, in a Bird-David sense (Bird-David 1990), and its ‘natural’ complexity⁴. How they work with birds is revealing of how they deal with life’s complexity.

Investigating Knowledge of Birds

Anthropological study of bird knowledge amongst the KhoeSan has not been extensive and pertains almost exclusively to Bushmen. Schapera (1930) includes snippets from the older ethnographic literature, which he has framed largely within contexts of omens and superstitions. Overwhelmingly, more recent researchers, principally Blurton Jones and Konner, Heinz, Guenther, and Silberbauer, conclude that knowledge is impressive. Heinz noted 65 names for 77 birds seen during his fieldwork amongst the !Ko, south of Ghanzi in Botswana (Heinz 1978:151-153) and a similarly impressive level of recognition is recorded by Guenther (2009 pers.com.). Collectively, research indicates that knowledge goes beyond what is required simply to hunt and that some bird species receive more attention than others. Knowledge is led by what is practically useful but also by where attention is

⁴ While Bird-David (1990) provides a useful idea in the notion of a giving environment, Ingold’s critique provides an essential caveat (Ingold 2000: 40-60).

ascribed within a culture in which birds inform the day-to-day. Attention is, as importantly, a reflection of personal interest as much as cultural prescription.

As in other fields of KhoeSan knowledge, bird knowledge may be highly variable, fluid, and inchoate; even in small communities it is not at all unusual to find that different people know different things or know similar things in different ways. Knowledge of birds is widespread across the community and not easily divisible across gender divides although it may possibly be slanted such that men know more of hunting birds or of reading bird behaviour when out hunting and women more about birds in relation to child health. Indicative of the problems of pinning down gender distinctions, Biesele notes the overlooked role of Ju/'hoan women in tracking and hunting and cites references to G/ui women and women from eastern Botswana setting bird snares (Biesele and Barclay 2001:77).

Ongoing artwork from Naro who have participated in a community art project at D'kar, Botswana, (commenced 1990)—similarly from !Xun and Khwe at a project in Schmidtdrift (1994) and subsequently Platfontaine (South Africa)—points to a considerable imaginative presence of birds amongst both male and female artists. This, like Hardbattle's narrative, presents good evidence of the importance and nature of bird interaction with Bushmen in recent years. Often, painted birds are large species, especially the ostrich, or otherwise distinctive species, such as falcon or guinea fowl. In the mid 1990s, Mathias Guenther determined that at D'kar when artists painted animals, men preferred to paint large veld animals, especially antelopes, whilst the women preferred plants, birds, insects, snakes, lizards, and frogs, all of which he identifies as part of a San woman's gatherable food repertoire (Guenther 2003:165). This distinction might well still hold, but the small numbers of artists at work since 2007, when I first observed them, is not conducive to drawing overly meaningful conclusions. Guenther particularly noted the prominence of the kori bustard and suggests this may reflect its importance in San mythology. The ostrich and the kori bustard are key birds of KhoeSan mythology and medicine. Their strong presence in recent artwork is therefore not perhaps surprising. Equally, the ostrich is one of the few birds to appear fairly regularly in KhoeSan rock art, notably followed by swallows or swifts (see Hollman 2005) and vultures.

Alongside artwork, another clear indicator of the significant role of birds in KhoeSan imaginative life is their presence in folktales. Although the actual number of tales that include birds is not strikingly high (see Schmidt 1989), where they do feature they occupy a special cosmological status. This is particularly true of the ostrich and kori bustard. The folktales recorded amongst historical and recent KhoeSan by Wilhelm Heinrich Immanuel Bleek, Sigrid Schmidt, Megan Biesele, and others provide significant insight into the sort of ideas and medicinal ingredients that still permeate KhoeSan life.

In the context of folk knowledge, one must also acknowledge a role for birds in folk sayings or song, phenomena that tend to be less-well studied by anthropologists. A Sesfontein Damara woman unusually recited ‘praises’ sometimes sung when eating. One of these included /ami, the ostrich: ‘the ostrich jumps the net with its feet’; this is a revealing snippet of old-style ostrich hunting. As a reminder of Ju’hoan social tendencies to mock pride and encourage equality, a Hai//om elder further related that, when younger, he and others sang a song: ‘why do you walk like the bird with the black and white chest’. The bird’s chest marking and posture reminded these Hai//om of a man in a suit. The song was sung when someone was strutting too proudly. It demonstrates how continued life ‘in nature’ provides metaphors in urbanising environments. That he no longer sings this song also suggests that birds can cease to become the reference points they were in older rural contexts.

Listening to Birds

Meaning for KhoeSan is intimately related to their ‘listening disposition’ by which they read and participate in myriad phenomena. KhoeSan environmental relationships resonate with Paul Radin’s observation of North American (Winnebago) Indians for whom, he comments, nature ‘blazes’ with information (in Berman 2000:11). I would not wish to generalise this disposition across the KhoeSan because of their social diversity at regional and very local levels. Equally, a blaze seems to detract from the everyday nature of this knowledge, exceedingly rich though it is amongst certain individuals. Nonetheless, as George Silberbauer observed of the G/ui, knowing what is normal and abnormal behaviour makes up ‘one part of the

G/ui environmental information spectrum, which is under constant, if automatic, observation' (Silberbauer 1981:72).

The way meaning is ascribed by KhoeSan to the day-to-day echoes Evans-Pritchard's observations amongst the Azande of the 'why did I trip over this root?' variety (Evans-Pritchard 1937). The KhoeSan are not superstitious; they simply have different explanations, and one must be wary when reasoning looks obvious. Some Hai//om, for instance, read the circling of vultures as an indication of a possible food source. From the perspective of my education, I can easily understand why vultures are telling me about a possible food source, but in this simple act I am blurring and collapsing important cultural boundaries. In contexts of meaning, Silberbauer relates how amongst the G/ui, animals are thought of in anthropomorphic terms that imbue certain types of animals with special knowledge, some of which is thought to be better than that of humans. The notion that vultures, for example, have special knowledge overlaps with one I have presented elsewhere (Low 2007a:S87) concerning how people are considered, and consider themselves, in terms of gifts or potency. The gift is essentially an aspect of who a person is. A man who massages well has that quality, or gift. Such gifts are God-given and can be transferred between people and, in an extension of the idea, between people and animals. Birds provide a particularly good example of this potency transference. What is transferred, or how this potency is referred to, varies with context but revolves primarily around linked ideas of people's or animal's smell and wind giving strength or causing illness.

The idea that wind, gifts, or personal qualities can be transferred between organisms points to a central way of thinking in which one animal or person can hold the essence of another. A person given the gift of healing by a healer is an 'owner' of that gift. KhoeSan can similarly own or possess animal essences that give them the abilities of, and establish an affinity with, particular animals. Ju/'hoansi are well known for turning into lions and doing lion things such as scaring other lions and people or travelling long distances to observe a distant village. It is not commonly reported that people turn into birds, but the notion is a possibility for many KhoeSan and is a feature of historical ethnography. In the late-nineteenth-century Bleek and Lloyd archive of /Xam Bushmen, we find healers, *!giten*, who could change into animals, taking such forms as jackals and birds (Hewitt 1986:296). One of

Bleek's informant's related a story of the wind that was formerly a man becoming a bird and living in the mountains (Skotnes 1999:40). The story captures ideas of transference and links between birds and wind that might be dismissed as folklore but that are revealing of actual past and current perceptions of transformational realities or possibilities.

Indicative of the detailed day-to-day knowledge of birds, abnormal or distinctive behaviour is often attributed to a bird being a person in animal form. Typically this would be a dead person. One Damara man told Dagmar Wagner-Robertz that his deceased father would appear to him as either a snake or a bird⁵. Lorna Marshall recorded in the 1950s that the Ju/'hoansi believed dead people, //gawwasi, sometimes changed into small birds, !gwara, that came to eat people's meat hanging in the branches beside their scherms (Marshall 1962:243).

Set against a disposition that is well-represented by the question 'what is this telling me?', birds carry meaning, which may be found in surrounding phenomena in space and time including weather, danger, bad luck, visitors, or other events. To KhoeSan, bird behaviour that tells them about visitors coming, or of secret information such as pregnancy or 'witchcraft' activity, is no different from bird behaviour that tells them about what is going on in the bush or with the weather. It is a significant distortion and fragmentation of KhoeSan thinking to start to try and dissemble these different types of observations and understandings into categories that are understandable in terms of ethology, based, on the one hand, on better or worse biological knowledge of nature, and, on the other hand, examples of superstitious knowledge.

The most common reading of bird behaviour relates to vocal chatter. Amongst the Hai//om, for instance, hearing the /hōness bird and the owl at night tells of imminent or distant visitors, as does hearing the //gauseb amongst Naro. Death and pregnancy are also key themes informed by bird presence. Amongst Naro, //gaus give messages of death and a brown bird (unspecified) settling in a nearby tree means someone is pregnant in the house. The /khai ah bird, known by the Ju/'hoansi, provides a particularly

⁵ Wagner-Robertz, 52 '//Gamagu'. Unpublished, typed, and indexed fieldwork notes of Dagmar Wagner-Robertz, held in 2001 by W. Haacke at The University of Namibia. Consulted with kind permission from Dr. Rudiger Wagner, Otterfing, Germany.

good example of the multiple roles of bird calls. The bird makes a pitiful noise if it is telling you something bad, like a relative has died and a good sound if something good is going to happen. It also warns you if something is near⁶.

What is meaningful to these KhoeSan relates intrinsically to their specific and general lifestyles. That death and pregnancy are meaningful is hardly surprising. It is also not surprising that one's safety on a hunting or collecting mission in the veld is of paramount importance. Weather, including lightning, and animals, including lions, elephants, puff adders, and cobras, continue to be a real threat. Indeed, as in the case of Ju/'hoansi and elephants, successful conservation initiatives are now blamed for making bush life more dangerous. For many KhoeSan, birds continue to play a key role when venturing into the bush.

It is tempting to frame KhoeSan linking of bird behaviour with environmental events as familiar empirical observation. Amongst some Naro, for instance, it is believed that if the francolin makes a 'kokoro' sound, it will be windy at night or if the *!nōroh* bird is 'playing or whistling too much', clouds will come and rain will soon follow. Both these examples seem to demonstrate keen observation and a pragmatic knowledge of nature. Undoubtedly, such knowledge does reveal a profound awareness of nature; it would, however, be fundamentally distorting to set this way of knowing apart from its wider context. What is characteristically KhoeSan about such observations is that causation is reversed on the basis of accepted observation. The bird does not whistle in response to rain. It is the bird whistling that brings the rain. This is empirical knowledge, but it is not formed by the same scientific understanding that backgrounds a Western notion of empiricism.

Opening the web of thinking still further, I suggest that the way birds are listened to fits within an unquestioning acceptance of the validity of intuition and feelings. Across the KhoeSan and beyond to their African neighbours, it is well-known that the body tells you things. KhoeSan hunters talk of feeling the quarry inside themselves. Bleek referred to these feelings as 'presentiments' (Bleek 1876:17). KhoeSan participate in a regional social-

⁶ I have not been able to identify all the birds I mention but am happy that this movement in and out of KhoeSan names serves to emphasise KhoeSan perspectives and requires us to think more about the relevance of names.

isation of sensations in which people recognise that twitches relate the death of a friend, the arrival of someone you have carried or, in the case of itchy thighs, the possibility of an imminent car journey. The body is accordingly listened to and socialised just as the veld and the birds within it are.

A related dimension of this intuitive listening propensity concerns how birds act as mediums for messages into the mind, not just in everyday terms but in healing contexts. While a Damara healer sleeps in his hut, for instance, those seeking solutions to illness place a stick with money attached to it into the outside wall. By morning the healer will be aware of the problem and the solution. The stick is called an *anib*, or a ‘kind of ancestor or spirit’. In the 1970s Wagner-Robertz recorded a Damara healing-dance song in which birds were praised as expeditious messengers (Wagner-Robertz 2000). In a dance I recorded in 2001, the powerful healer danced in the form of a bird. In view of the currency of birds in these contexts, I strongly suspect that the root of the word *anib* lies in its other meaning as a male bird, the implication being that the bird flies from the ancestors or deity bearing the solution.

Bird Medicine and Bird Sickness

Whilst birds are broadly distinctive for their flight and vocal communication, and while these aspects feature strongly in links between liminal states and messages (both practical and prophetic), the medical relevance of birds relates more specifically to their size and eating habits. In medicine, it is not so much songbirds but big birds that count, namely the ostrich and the kori bustard. The ostrich is undoubtedly the most significant bird in KhoeSan medicine. The parts used include the dung, eggshell, fat, feathers, and leg tendons. Historical ethnography and folktales provide good evidence for the historical significance of the ostrich and kori bustard and some details of earlier use. Most importantly, earlier stories provide evidence for ways of thinking about these birds in relation to the nature of life, the meaning of animals, and the role of animals in causing or curing sickness. This historical material dovetails with ideas and practices current amongst most KhoeSan I encountered.

Ostrich eggshell is the strongest contender for a universal KhoeSan medicine. Amongst Damara, Nama, Hai//om, and Khamani, it is a key

ingredient in a formulaic mixture given as a first line of treatment for illness of children. The Damara refer to this illness as /gôaron //ob(s), literally children's sickness (Low 2007b:796). Biomedical diagnosis for /gôaron //ob includes dehydration, meningitis, gastroenteritis, and malaria. Ingredients in the medicine vary between groups but commonly include ground aardwolf anal gland, jackal liver, and bat-eared fox kidney. Some Naro women just fed eggshell powder on its own to babies, combined it with giraffe or eland fat as a chest rub in cases of flu, or rubbed the fat and eggshell all over a child's body to enhance its strength. Numerous Naro and Ju/hoansi give their children ties of ostrich eggshell beads to make them 'strong'. Young and old alike also wear them to encourage strong joints, particularly of the neck or back.

Ostrich fat is used by some Naro within their general massage strategies. Amongst Ju/'hoansi, fat is sometimes drunk if they are feeling tired or sick. Some Nama use applications of ostrich dung for burns on children. For sore eyes, Tsodilo Ju/'hoansi gave eggshell in water to drink, whilst Nama and Damara rubbed burnt feathers into the eyes. Far more commonly, feathers are used as 'ritual' accoutrements of KhoeSan dancing healers when they are bound together in a 'fly whisk' and used to waft the air or swat recipients of potency. This swatting is part of the process of 'opening' a person to receive potency or to align potency already in them. The final significant category of medicinal ostrich use concerns use of leg tendons which the Damara tie around knees and lower limbs to help sore and stiff legs. The problem is referred to as ≠gurub.

Other than the ostrich, the most significant medicinal bird is the kori bustard. As with the ostrich, kori bustard parts are mixed with a varying range of organic ingredients. Damara use both the stomach contents and the dung of the bird. One woman mixed the stomach contents with a small !hutubi insect and gave the mixture to children either in water solution (as a drink) or by rubbing it into small 'medicinal cuts'. Another woman mixed the stomach contents with ground acacia beetle and tree gum, and still another with ostrich eggshell and aardwolf dung, which she rubbed on the body of children to protect them from strong ≠oab, or the wind of other children or people. The fact that much kori bustard use also relates to treating children's sicknesses points to an overlap in ideas about these two distinctively large bird species.

Beyond the kori bustard and the ostrich, I encountered very little further reference to bird medicine. One Damara man reported cooking the nest of the *≠ereb* bird (*Prinia* species) in water and drinking the concoction for stomach pain. Another Damara roasted a nest, also probably of the *≠ereb*, put it into his mouth, and blew it into the mouth of a child with mouth sores. A Ju/'hoansi man washed a child with the soup of a boiled *!ga* bird to treat excessive crying. Although I have little additional evidence, I suspect that more birds are occasionally used, but such use is probably quite idiosyncratic and inconsistent⁷.

Indicative of broader ideas of potency exchange, although uncommon in other KhoeSan-animal relations, there exists a widespread idea amongst the Bushmen that children's sickness may be caused by the shadow of a bird or by walking under a bird's nest. This belief is also found amongst other Africans of the region but is not obvious amongst the Nama and Damara. Wagner-Robertz does, however, identify the belief amongst Damara that if birds build a nest from your hair you will go mad; this claim is highly suggestive of wider bird potency ideas⁸. For the other KhoeSan, the idiom of the idea varies across and amongst groups, but there is a clear underlying theme that the shadow or wind of a bird or its nest enters a child and the child consequently manifests malignant bird characteristics. Some Hai//om described how the shadow of the *//gores* bird will *!goo* a baby. The name of the bird translates as 'claw' bird. The illness is identified when a baby coughs in a manner that sounds like the bird. Haacke translates *!goo* as 'bellow (of: cattle on smelling blood)' (Haacke and Eiseb 2002:320). I strongly suspect *!goo* relates to the bird call going into the baby in the sense of sound or voice equating to wind transference. It is an idea semantically tied to Damara bad thoughts, *≠ais*, that clog the throat. Equally it resonates with a Naro idea of *kgaba* (*khaba*) that one of my 'informants' described as 'something that gets into you that is still angry and gets into your heart'; he used this expression specifically to describe how a bird 'covers' a child with its shadow. The shadow will *//gai*, or 'sit on', the baby and *khaba* it. Guenther similarly described 'kgaba' as an illness caused by someone's bad thoughts. He relates that it comes from their heart and is exuded in saliva and

⁷ For a more complete account of animal use see 'Tables of animals used in KhoeSan medicine' on the author's website www.thinkingthreads.com.

⁸ Wagner-Robertz, MS, 65.

breath. It is not deliberate, it just happens (Guenther 1992:86-88). Unlike Guenther, who frames *kgaba* in contexts of acculturated ‘witchcraft’ beliefs, as I have discussed (Low 2008:220), it seems a thoroughly KhoeSan concept, if not word. In this complex of bird, wind, shadow, and bad thoughts lies a very KhoeSan explanation for illness.

An accompanying sign of the //gores bird sickness is stasis or depression of the anterior fontanel, a medical sign of dehydration. One Hai//om man reported the sickness could be passed from the mother, through her milk, to the baby. One treatment for the illness is to rub sweat or soil on the anterior fontanel, or to place a piece of grass there. In a similar manner, Ju/'hoansi spoke of the *subbah* or *tsaba* (eagle?) bird causing depression of the anterior fontanel. To protect children, parents rub a mixture of white ash and mother's milk onto the child's head. Other Ju/'hoansi referred to a sickness-causing bird as //gam, and the anterior fontanel sickness as /na /num. One Ju/'hoansi man described how a big bird shouts over a baby and ‘puts its body into the baby’. The sickness is commonly recognised when the fingers of the afflicted child begin clawing like bird feet.

Why are Birds Used in Medicine?

The evidence for medicinal bird use lies not in asking KhoeSan directly, which is fruitless, but in pulling together examples of birds being used medicinally from habits, references, and understandings. Untangling the web of relations that informs practice leaves us with two primary themes, although these, it must be recognised, merely serve as ways into the far more complex web of relations in which medical actions operate. The first theme relates to what kori bustards and ostriches eat, the second to the significance of ostrich strength and size (including egg size).

Numerous KhoeSan related that the porcupine is an exceptional medicine animal because it eats a variety of highly medicinal plants. Porcupine stomach is well known for its potency and is deemed a very strong medicine across the KhoeSan groups I have encountered. The efficacy of elephant dung is similarly attributed to the wide range of special plants elephants eat. It is highly probable that use of the kori bustard's stomach contents and use of the dung of both animals relates to what the birds are known to eat. Again, the important task here lies in not segregating this

empirical knowledge from the wider inchoate knowledge of these animals that contributes to popular ideas of their medical potency. Discussion of ostrich medicine highlights such complexity.

A key background to medicinal use of ostrich lies in its size and strength and in how these qualities, in line with wider ideas of potency movement, are believed to be transferred between the ostrich and people. The way KhoeSan typically talk about such human / animal transference of essence is through the wind, smell, or shadow of the animal entering the person. In practice, transference of potency entails taking parts of an animal and rubbing them into a 'medicinal cut', wearing animal parts, rubbing them on, eating and drinking them, burning them and sniffing the smoke produced, or allowing animal fluids into ears or eyes. Using parts of the ostrich bestows the recipient with attributes of the ostrich. Sometimes strength is conferred generically through, for example, rubbing on or drinking fat, while other times it is conferred specifically by such methods as wearing the leg tendon of an ostrich on one's leg to help with knee and leg problems. Reflecting on fat use in this context reminds us that reasoning can never be assumed to be homogeneous or singular. Fat is used widely as a potent rub, both for its particular strengths linked to derivative animal smell and identity and for its practical skin-protective qualities. At the same time it acts as a massage lubricant. In one action fat holds multiple meanings: drinking ostrich fat is a nutritious act and simultaneously a potent one.

The specific ostrich parts used, and the ailments KhoeSan treat with them, indicate particular variations of what is known about ostriches. The use of ostrich tendons on poor legs speaks to both the exceptional strength of ostrich legs and the similarity of ostrich legs to human legs. A !Kung man pointed to this in his comment that the ostrich is a medicine because it 'walks like a person'⁹. Bands of ostrich tendons or ostrich eggshell beads are worn by KhoeSan around the body to confer strength. Often this practice is meant to help with spinal problems. The bands are typically placed around the neck of infants to help lolling heads and weak necks. This use mobilizes the strength of the ostrich in a generic sense whilst also drawing on an awareness of the exceptionally strong and prominent ostrich neck. Across all the

⁹ '!Kung' refers to Namibian Bushmen living north east of Etosha National Park. They are distinctive from the Ju/'hoansi of the northern Kalahari, who were called !Kung in older literature.

KhoeSan, although less commonly amongst the Ju/'hoansi, a primary use of ostrich medicine is to treat colds, coughing, runny noses, and flu symptoms. Following associations made between eating eland chest meat and curing coughing problems, it is reasonable to suspect that this is linked to the highly prominent chest of the ostrich. As colds and coughs are a common problem of young and old alike, giving a medicine that generally bestows the longevity, health, and vigour of the ostrich is not surprisingly a common practice. Following eland medicine reasoning, using the chest of the ostrich would confer chest vigour and help treat chest problems.

If historian Felipe Fernández-Armesto is right that the antiquity of cultural practice is indicated by the extent of its occurrence (Fernández-Armesto 2004:38), then recent use of ostriches by KhoeSan ranging from southern Angola to the Cape suggests such use is old. The historical salience of ostrich is further supported by the widespread occurrence of the ostrich as a special animal in KhoeSan stories, new and old. Although there is virtually nothing in the way of historical records about ostrich medicine, there are accounts from later nineteenth-century philologists Wilhelm Bleek and Theophilus Hahn that provide the wider ideational context in which ostriches sat amongst KhoeSan—at least amongst the /Xam and Cape Khoekhoe. What is always surprising is how when one begins to explore these older stories and ideas amongst recent KhoeSan, continuities repeatedly emerge. This allows the setting up of a rewarding dialogue between the past and the present.

Across recent and historical KhoeSan narratives, the ostrich and kori bustard appear in contexts that connect them to fire and ideas surrounding creation or re-creation. Biesele notes stories amongst the Ju/'hoansi that feature the kori bustard as a kind of 'captain' of the other animals. A similar notion crops up in an account by the missionary Samuel Shaw Dornan concerning the Hiecheware Bushmen. Dornan recounts a Bushman story in which the lion discovers that the ostrich, 'king of the animals', has no teeth (cited by Schmidt 1989:237). Biesele further elaborates that amongst the Ju/'hoansi the powerful wings of the kori bustard were said to have fanned the fires at the mythological branding in which animals were given their specific characteristics and thereby separated from mankind (Biesele 1993:23,98).

Amongst the Hai//om, I have encountered variations of stories linking ostriches to fire that echo those in the wider ethnography. In earlier research amongst Naro, for example, Guenther recorded stories about ostriches, usually though not exclusively female ones, as the custodian of the first fire. Typically the ostrich is said to have hidden or kept the embers of the first fire alight under her wings or apron (Guenther 1999:160). These sorts of stories locate ostriches and kori bustards at the transition between First Order Creation and Second Order Creation, or the 'mythical' junction between when animals and people were the same and then became separated. This status grants these birds, particularly the ostrich, a magical quality, which has been specifically acknowledged by at least one /Xam Bushman, who called the ostrich 'Magic Bird'. Further evidence of this magic status lies in observations made by the Eastwoods, who recently encountered a Naro belief in a magical-looking Ostrich Woman, /Osê. /Osê is particularly dangerous to children and visible only to shamans (Eastwood 2006:108).

A further essential pole of this magical status is rooted in associations between ostriches and ideas of rebirth or resurrection. Bleek noted the recurrence of stories concerning the resurrection of a dead male ostrich 'in and through one of its little feathers'. He observed that this resurrection was compared to the coming of the moon, the only other phenomenon, so the /Xam said, not to die outright (cited by Hewitt 2001:182). The wider archive of Bleek and his colleague, Lucy Lloyd, provides further information about the pertinence of the moon. In a number of tales recorded by Bleek and Lloyd, /Xam Bushmen related that /Kaggen, an archetypal trickster figure central to many /Xam tales, pierced an eland's gall that was hanging on a bush. The gall burst and blocked out the sun. To see his way home, /Kaggen created the moon from a feather, which Lloyd identified as an ostrich feather. R.L. Hewitt suggests that the curling shape of a feather relates to the arc-shape of a new moon, and he emphasises the strength of /Xam beliefs about the regenerative power of the moon, noting that the /Xam even had a ceremony to 'bestow its revived energies upon them'. Hewitt concludes that the feather, as a moon, 'lights the darkness and mediates Life and Death' (Hewitt 2001:174, 182).

It is not solely through the moon, however, that the ostrich links with ideas of celestial birth or rebirth. Hahn, another late-nineteenth-century philologist and 'native' Khoekhoe speaker, linked the ostrich egg to the sun.

Through etymological analysis, Hahn proposed that ‘it is not unlikely’ that the sun, which is round and white, was equated by at least Khoikhoi, if not Bushmen, to the ‘egg par excellence’, the ostrich egg (Hahn 1881:141). Giving further weight to connections between creation, people, and ostriches, elsewhere Hahn cites a Korana belief that Tsu//goab, the creator of the Khoikhoi, originally made a man, Kanima (or ‘ostrich feather’) and a woman, known as ‘yellow copper’ (Hahn 1881:105). In at least these historical contexts, Khoekhoe and San ideas of the ostrich feed into ideas surrounding the sun, moon regeneration, and creation that seem highly relevant to more recent beliefs linking medicine and life to idioms of waking up and standing up into life. As ever though, there is an ambivalence in potency, medicine, and life. A Ju’hoansi man told of the dangers of eating ostrich eggshell, which can make a person go mad. It is too much. In a similar sense the Ju’hoansi recognise that the life-giving sun is potent, it is *n/um*, but it can also be too much, a ‘death thing’ (Marshall 1969:352).

Some Nama women feed newborn babies, over a period of a few days, with a tiny amount of burnt ostrich eggshell. They say that the baby does not yet know anything. The medicine is to ‘teach’ the child, ‘it is the first thing that comes to his mouth’. The medicine is called *!huitsa*. The word is interesting for two reasons. Although establishing word derivation and linkages is a problematic process, it seems highly probable that *!huitsa* relates to *!hui*, meaning bursting open, exploding or opening of a spring and bursting into blossom (Haacke and Eiseb 2002:337). The name seems to juggle an idea of coming forth into creation. If so this would be consistent with the wider ontological context of ostrich eggs and ostriches. It is also interesting, although at this stage entirely conjectural, to note that the same root, *!hui.b*, means kori bustard in Khoekhoegowab.¹⁰ It might well be, then, that this linguistic relationship is further evidence of semantic overlap regarding these birds.

The idea of the ostrich egg as a giver of life and an object of exceptional potency and significance further exists in beliefs of the Ju’hoansi, as recorded by Bradford Keeney. Keeney has worked with the Ju’hoansi since the early 1990s. He notes that the most powerful dream a

¹⁰ Khoekhoegowab is the language spoken predominantly by the Nama, Damara and Hai//om. The Naro speak a variation. Some ≠Khomani also speak Khoekhoegowab although most speak Afrikaans.

Ju/'hoansi shaman can have is of an ostrich eggshell cracking open. Having this dream provides a ready connection between the shaman and the supernal forces or beings that underlie Ju/'hoan cosmology. Additionally, some shaman believe that, when they are dancing, the coloured threads they see linking the 'heavens' to the earth are threads of ostrich eggshell beads. Climbing each bead takes the shaman one step nearer the ancestors and the Big God (Keeney 2003:42, 60).

Keeney records that Ju/'hoansi healers speak of *kabi*, or sacred visions, in which they are given gifts from the gods. Amongst the gifts are ostrich feathers, *kxao-kxao !kui*, that are used by healers as 'decoration' (Keeney 'declaration', pers.com.).¹¹ The gift may be a vision of what to make and use, a necklace or feather whisk, for example, or it might bring significance to a chance find or an opportunistic acquisition of ostrich feathers. The feathers are used by healers in healing dances across the KhoeSan, except, in my experience, amongst the Nama. They may be used to beat a person's body or sweep out sickness, to sweep a coal into a tortoise shell and singe the fragrant *sâi* plant powder within, to hold and sweep about when dancing, or to wear on the body, usually in a headdress type manner. In this latter use of feathers lies the undoubted harnessing of an effective stage prop and elaborate tool, but also the recruitment of a potent object capable of mediating potency within the healing context. In a related sense, using ostrich eggshell in the moth-cocoon rattles worn around the legs of dancing Bushmen shaman, is to use both an effective rattling 'stone' and a potent object.

Conclusion

In my analysis, I have tried to capture what is at the heart of bird relationships in recent and historical times. I have highlighted ways in which birds feed into KhoeSan life at profound levels of knowledge and healing and, in turn, how this relates to broader environmental relationships and relationships with knowledge. At the heart of this alignment of environmental experience and ways of thinking lies a complex web of familiar and unfamiliar knowledge and intuition. Perhaps the most important

¹¹ For a transcript of this 'declaration' by Ju/'hoansi healers about their healing see Keeney (2007).

means of understanding KhoeSan thought involves rejecting Western intellectual categories of enquiry. Knowledge of the environment can be empirical, but not in ways that equate absolutely with the empiricism of Western intellectual traditions. Even discussion of KhoeSan ‘myths’, ‘folklore’, ‘stories’, or narratives holds the danger of distancing the KhoeSan from the real meanings inherent in their oral accounts. In a world of possibilities, ‘stories’ are judged by experience, personal knowledge, and intuition. KhoeSan I have met have seen people change into animals and known giant snakes to fly around the mountains of northern Namibia.

In light of Bieseles’s ideas concerning persistent hunter-gatherer ways of thinking and arguments linking the spread of ideas with their longevity, I have suggested that the sorts of bird relationships I have described can be used to inform our thinking about the deeper archaeological past, although determining how far back one can go remains problematic. I have moved through examples of bird interaction to try and capture what I see as continuity in everyday and healing ways of thinking about birds that run across time and space, from historical Cape /Xam to recent northern Namibian Damara. It is a very similar sort of continuity to that identified by Bieseles in terms of folklore and by Barnard in terms of KhoeSan religion—not absolute but patterned. Although space has not permitted analysis of rock art, the webs of potency that weave through much of the art provide a good way of thinking about how featured birds are enmeshed in KhoeSan experience of life. Therianthropic half-human, half-animal bird-people become more understandable if we think about how KhoeSan might share qualities and potency with birds.

The paper’s medical focus has led to key ideas that must always be kept in mind when considering birds in any KhoeSan contexts. The multiple identity of ostrich eggshell bead necklaces, in particular, suggests how cautious we must be in dissecting recent and ancient KhoeSan culture through rigid categories of enquiry. Thomas Dowson has observed that KhoeSan dancing healers wear ostrich eggshell beads to impress bystanders and make themselves look strong and attractive to the spirits with whom they communicate (Dowson 1989:85). Whilst this seems a reasonable assessment, as we have seen, as we have seen, is more complex still. There is potency in ideas of attraction, and strength-bestowing properties are inherent in beads. Bieseles notes that early gemsbok people are said to have been the first to

make ostrich eggshell beads (cited by Dowson 1989:85). Ostrich beads have a long and rich history. I have no doubt that, in addition to these folklore and healing contexts, part of the potency of ostrich eggs also lies in their 'practical' value as water containers. One should not underestimate what securing or finding a stash of water represents in arid environments. Less clearly, although still relevantly, tools such as ostrich bone for making mats and baskets carry and perpetuate the wider potency of ostriches. So too does eating their meat, as /Xam prohibitions concerning ostrich gizzard remind us (Bank 2006:247).

The idea of birds as messengers appears amongst KhoeSan in a manner that strongly overlaps with birds in many cultures. Their song and their arrival and departure in the air, with no trace, give them a meaningful liminal quality. But the meaning of birds stretches further than that associated with songbirds or others that alight around camp. Birds of all sorts may have meaning depending on the context, but some are known for the special knowledge, like the vulture as an indicator of food. Amongst the KhoeSan, the liminal aspect of birds is developed further still in the ancestral *anib* messenger, or the kori bustard, at the first branding. It is, however, the magical ostrich that plays with the essence of what it means to be KhoeSan. In the ostrich as mediator of life and death, we glimpse a feel for the flexibility, imagination, openness, and responsiveness that characterises the mindset of these recent hunter-gatherers and pastoralists.

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