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KhoeSan shamanistic relationships with snakes and rain

Chris Low*

Abstract

In 1874 an article on Bushman rock art by colonial magistrate Joseph Orpen was published in the Cape Monthly Magazine. The article, which subsequently proved to be highly influential in Southern African rock art studies, contains intriguing references to charm medicine containing 'burnt snake powder'. Despite Orpen's work being widely known and the highly unusual nature of his references, they have not, as yet, been examined in greater detail. In this paper I look at what makes these references so distinctive, how they might relate to a KhoeSan healing dance and whether they reveal a distinct later nineteenth century relationship between Bushmen, Khoekhoe, snakes and rain. Both historically and in more recent times there is evidence of people amongst the KhoeSan known as 'poison doctors' who profess immunity to snake-bites. I explore connections between this immunity and snake charm medicine and ask whether poison doctors of the past may have been called upon to beseech the divine Water Snake to bring rain. Outlining the broader context of KhoeSan snake beliefs and snake relationships, I then go on to examine the connections between snakes, rain and KhoeSan divinity, which place the snake, and particularly the python, at the heart of KhoeSan ontology and epistemology.

Introduction

In 1874 *The Cape Monthly Magazine* published an article by a colonial magistrate, Joseph Orpen, concerning rock art he had recently seen in the Maluti mountains of Lesotho. The article subsequently played a crucial role in the emergence of a shamanistic interpretation of Southern African rock art.[1] The article is important, firstly, because of the historical and anthropological value of what Orpen's Bushman guide, Qing, and Dia!kwain, a |Xam Bushman from the North West Cape region, had to say about the paintings. Qing was a young local Bushman. His comments represent one of only three instances when information was obtained on Southern African rock paintings

* Chris Low practised as an osteopath and read archaeology and history of medicine at Durham University and University College London. He completed his PhD on medicine of the KhoeSan in 2004 at the University of Oxford. He is currently affiliated with African Studies, University of Oxford and is heading a charitable education and heritage initiative amongst South Africa's San people. E-mail: chris.low@africa.ox.ac.uk

[1] Peter Mitchell and S. Challis, "A 'first' glimpse into the Maloti Mountains: the diary of James Murray Grant's expedition of 1873-74", *Southern African Humanities*, 20, 2008: 399-461 (399).

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whilst painting was still part of the informant's living tradition.[2] Dia!kwain and possibly other |Xam, a Bushmen group which is now extinct, were shown copies of the paintings by the philologist Wilhelm Bleek not long after Orpen's discovery. Secondly, by asking Dia!kwain for his interpretation, Bleek set in place what has become an on-going practice of comparative KhoeSan analysis.[3] Finally, in the 1970s interest in Bushman rock art took a new direction as scholars recognised the value of combining details found in older ethnography, particularly including Orpen's article and the |Xam archive, with emerging detailed anthropology, as they set about interpreting Bushman rock art scenes and motifs. The shamanistic interpretation that emerged from this approach not only revolutionised the understanding of Southern African rock art but has had significant impact on analysis of rock art the world over.

In this article I wish to return once more to Orpen's work because, despite the attention his article has received, there seems to have been little acknowledgement that certain aspects of what Qing says in relation to snakes and shamans are unusual. Examining Qing's comments on snakes not only promises considerable historical insight into the shifting salience of rain-snake ideas, but also sheds light on issues at the heart of KhoeSan epistemology and ontology and profound links between rain, snakes, ideas of life, divinity and healing.

My interpretation of this material is based on my long term comparative study of Khoekhoe ('Khoe') and Bushman ('San'), or 'KhoeSan', medicine.[4] In addition to extensive ethnographic and archival research, I have completed over two and a half years of fieldwork, principally amongst Damara, Hai||om, !Xun, Ju|'hoansi, Naro and ǂKhomani peoples. This article is a distillation of this material. Because full referencing behind each of my assertions would render the text unreadable, I generalize advisedly and reference only when a particular point requires explicit substantiation. When I move between KhoeSan, Khoe and Bushmen I do so specifically using Khoe to refer to the Khoe (Khoekhoegowab) speaking Damara, Hai||om, !Xun and Naro.

Sitting at ease smoking by the camp-fire, Orpen questioned Qing about the rock art scenes they had seen together, including four painted scenes he copied and published

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[2] Peter Mitchell, "Making history at Sehonghong: Soai and the Last Bushman Occupants of his Shelter", *Southern African Humanities*, 22, 2010: 149-170 (149).

[3] J. Davis Lewis-Williams, (ed.), *Stories that float from afar: Ancestral Folklore of the San of Southern Africa*, Cape Town, Philip, 2002: 22.

[4] Use of the agglutinative name 'KhoeSan' follows the lead of scholars, particularly Schapera and Barnard, who have co-opted Schultze's artificial compound term Khoisan, which he applied on grounds of biological similarity, because they recognise sufficient cultural and linguistic continuities to warrant consideration of these peoples within one convenient overriding category. Similarly my focus on medicine supports the validity of considering Khoekhoe and Bushmen as deeply entangled peoples. I have adapted the spelling of 'Khoisan', a European word, to retain the usefulness of the term whilst acknowledging the equality of the Khoekhoe and San peoples; hence the 'S' is capitalized. The shift from Khoi to Khoe reflects modern orthographic change; cf. Isaac Schapera, *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa*, London, Routledge, 1930; Alan Barnard, *Hunters and Herders of Southern Africa: A Comparative Ethnography of the Khoisan Peoples*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press,1992: 7.

as an accompaniment to his article. In response Qing related a number of mythopoeic tales relating to a trickster creator figure, Cagn, and a time of origins when people and animals were merged and shifted from one form to another. The stories included considerable references to snakes. Reflecting on one of the images, which was published later, Qing observed: "men with rhebok's heads [...] and the tailed men [...] live mostly under water; they tame eland and snakes". In relation to the scene represented in Fig.1 he continued, surprisingly: "That animal which the men are catching is a snake". Qing elaborated that the people in the scene were people "spoilt by the dance", who "die from it". It was a dance given by Cagn. In the dance those "whose charms are weak" eat "charm medicine, in which there is burnt snake powder". The dancers placed their hands on a sick person and received the "secret" things that had "injured him".[5]

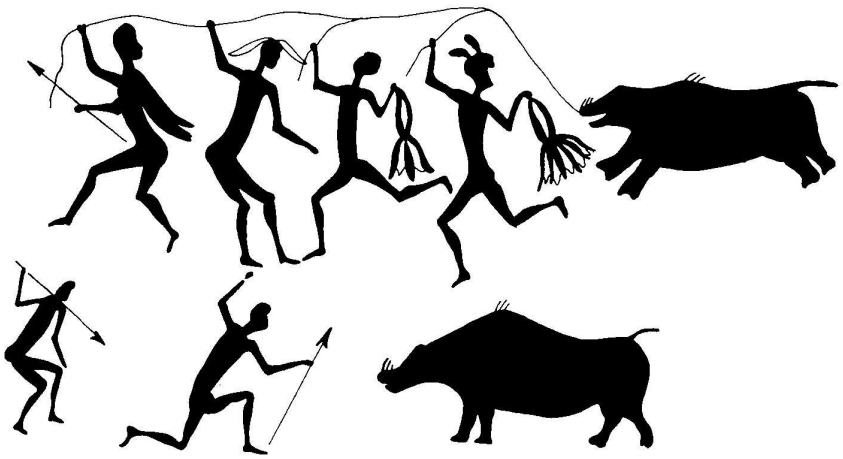

Figure 1. Orpen's 1873 copy of rock art he observed with Qing. The scene is thought to represent rain-men capturing the rain-animal. It is one of four images published in a foldout that accompanied Orpen's 1874 article.[6]

Orpen's article is appended with Bleek's comments on the material and a summary of what Dia!kwain purportedly made of the pictures. Unlike Qing, Dia!kwain interpreted the animal being led by the figures, not as a snake, but a "water thing, or water cow". It was captured to be led across the country, "their superstition being that wherever this animal goes, rain will fall". Bleek suggests the |Xam identified the two figures nearest

[5] Joseph M. Orpen, "A glimpse into the mythology of the Maluti Bushmen", *Cape Monthly Magazine*, 9, 1874: 1-13 (10).

[6] Reproduced from J. Davis Lewis-Williams, *The Rock Art of Southern Africa*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983: 20.

the animal as 'sorcerers', charming the animal with boochoo [buchu], a fragrant smelling fynbos plant.[7]

Scholars widely recognise that what Qing described is a type of shamanistic Bushman 'dancing' which has survived into the present from the distant archaeological past.[8] In the dance Bushmen shamans treat others with 'potency' or travel transcendentally, sometimes in search of rain. Despite the importance attributed to Qing's account, the intriguing observation that 'snake powder' is given to those whose charms were weak has been almost entirely overlooked. Nowhere else have I encountered the use of snake powder in KhoeSan 'healing' or 'trance' dances. Furthermore, although scholars have investigated Qing and Dia!kwain's different interpretations of the rain animal as a snake or Water Cow, no one has yet explored how this snake charm medicine relates to rain animals, healing and taming snakes. Orpen's article presents a particularly rich focus on snakes and raises the interesting prospect that, unlike in recent times, in the later nineteenth century, these Bushmen at least, used parts of snakes to enable them to catch the rain and to heal.

Although the practice of taking snake powder to become stronger is not found in KhoeSan healing dances, it is in a different scenario, where it is used as a means of procuring immunity to snake-bites. In this article I explore how Qing's comments might reveal an association between KhoeSan healers and people who undertake this immunity procedure, known as 'poison doctors' in the ethnography, or */ao !ga ao.b/s* in Khoe.[9] I then contextualize this practice within wider KhoeSan ideas and relationships with snakes to demonstrate how central these are to KhoeSan ways of thinking about and working in the world. Key themes are fertility, rain, healing and the transformative quality of life.

Snakes, snake-bite and poison doctors are a significant feature of KhoeSan historical ethnography. There are also numerous and widespread depictions of 'supernatural' snakes in the rock art of Southern Africa.[10] Moreover, snakes play a prominent role in KhoeSan folklore which, although only extensively recorded from the later nineteenth century onwards, almost certainly contains themes of far older provenance. I propose that Qing's comments are evidence of a salience and currency of snakes in KhoeSan culture that seems to have declined since the later nineteenth century. Indications are

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[7] Andrew Bank rightly alerts us to the discrepancy between alleged comments of made by the |Xam and recorded by Bleek and notes found in Bleek's diaries. This does not affect the basic interpretation that these are medicine men leading a rain-animal with something. The notebooks do not identify the something as 'boochoo' but, regardless of whether this was actually mentioned at the time, Bleek's assertion is entirely congruent with the wider evidence of the |Xam archive, cf. Andrew Bank, *Bushmen in a Victorian World: the Remarkable Story of the Bleek-Lloyd Collection of Bushman Folklore*, Cape Town, Double Story Books, 2006: 304-311; Orpen, "Glimpse": 12.

[8] Lewis-Williams, *Rock Art*: 21.

[9] Literally: */ao*, snake, */ga*, poison, *ao.b* man. The phenomenon seems only to include men.

[10] Lara Malan, "Linking sex, species and a supernatural snake at Lab X rock art site", in: Geoffrey Blundell, (ed.), *Further Approaches to Southern African Rock Art*, Vlaeberg, South African Archaeological Society, 2005: 3-10 (4).

that this decline in prominence relates to diminishing everyday familiarity with snakes set within hunter-gatherer lifestyles and strategies. One possible factor in this decline is greater access to borehole water reducing the need for KhoeSan to beseech and work with the great Water Snakes to bring rain and ensure that pools remain filled.[11] Perhaps in older times the poison doctors, as masters of snakes, played a significant role in working with these snakes of the water?

In her 1990s folklore research on relationships between snakes and water in the Northern Cape and southern Namibia, Hoff identified |Xam descendants who believed in a giant, water-bringing snake.[12] The Water Snake was thought to live mainly in the sky alongside the Water Bull, an apparent variation on the idea of the Rain Bull / Water Cow found amongst the historical |Xam. Hoff found very little evidence of this belief beyond Bushmanland and observed that the Nama living around the Orange River had forgotten older ideas of a good and bad Water Snake and Water Bull in the sky, which symbolised the good and bad dimensions of rain. Alternatively, the Nama only believed in a giant quasi-mythical and largely malign snake that lived in and near watercourses.

Hoff may be right to suggest that these Nama had supplanted old dual quasi-divine snake and bull beliefs with a more earthly snake, but belief in aerial snakes, sometimes associated with water, do still exist amongst other KhoeSan groups, including the Damara and Hai||om.[13] At the same time, wider research reveals how embedded ideas of snakes and water are in still current themes of rain, fecundity and origins on the one hand and deceit, anger, sickness and death on the other. Hoff is probably justified in highlighting duality as an earlier feature of snake and water beliefs in KhoeSan cultures but evidence suggests a need to think of this duality as part of spectrum of inter-related, ambiguous, contingent and fluid ideas.

Poison doctors and snake 'defenders'

References to snakes are a feature of some of the earliest KhoeSan ethnography and persist throughout the colonial record. This reflects an awareness, shared by KhoeSan and colonists alike, of the dangers of snake-bites. Substances and methods used to treat snake-bites by KhoeSan included cutting and sucking with applications of tortoise blood, fat, plant extracts, tobacco oil and even snake or lizard body parts.[14] In recent

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[11] This is a conclusion that relates to the findings of my three years ESRC funded research project, *Animals in Bushman Medicine* (2005-2008). I remain very grateful to the ESRC for this funding opportunity.

[12] Ainsie Hoff, "Water Bull of the |Xam"; The South African Archaeological Bulletin, 168, 1998: 109-124; idem, "The Water Snake of the Khoekhoen and |Xam," *The South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 165, 1997: 21-37.

[13] Cf. Sigrid Schmidt, "The Rain Bull of the South African Bushmen", *African Studies*, 38 (2), 1979, 201-224 (208).

[14] Carl Peter Thunberg, *Travels at the Cape of Good Hope 1772-1775, based on an English edition 1793-1795, ed. by V.S. Forbes*, Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, 1986: 301; William Barry Lord and Thomas Baines, *Shifts and Expedients of Camp Life, Travel and Exploration*, London, Cox, 1876: 82; Schapera, *Khoisan Peoples* : 216, 409.

contexts one of the most common treatments KhoeSan cite is the application, or ingestion, of petrol. Other remedies include applying a mixture of the kidney fat of the oryx or kudu with ground puff adder teeth or swallowing goat fat mixed with ground tongue, tail and hairs of the black tailed mongoose (Hai||om).[15] Not surprisingly the latter mixture induces vomiting and this is considered an essential aspect of snake-bite treatment by many KhoeSan.

From the early nineteenth century onwards ethnographic accounts of snake-bite treatment strategies began to be supplemented by mention of 'snake doctors' or 'poison doctors'. The doctors made themselves immune to snake, scorpion and spider bites by making small cuts in their skin and rubbing in snake poison, including that of the cobra, night adder and black mamba, crushed scorpion tails or poisonous spiders.[16] Such mixtures might also be swallowed. Some even used live snakes to make controlled bites on their chest. All these procedures entailed introducing increasing amounts of poison with each dose, over an extended time period.[17] Similar practices of rubbing poison into cuts or orally ingesting poison still survive among the KhoeSan today although they are not common.

Qing mentioned that burnt snake powder was given to those whose charms were weak. This implies that snake medicine made the dancers stronger or better prepared. In recent healing dances the very strong smell of plants called *buchu*, or more commonly *sâi* or *sa*, is used to prepare the dancers. This is conceived as 'opening' the mind and body of a person to the potency woken up in, and called to, the healing dance. In Orpen's article '*cannā*' features as a local variant of these potent plants.[18] Some Bushmen also use smelly animal parts in a related manner, notably including the anus of the striped polecat which is sniffed and rubbed on the body and face of a healer (Ju|hoansi, Naro, ǂKhomani).[19] The link between use of buchu, *sâi*, narcotic *cannā* and

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[15] Mina Tikee, date of interview: 13/10/2007; Jan Tsumeb, 29/7/2001. For further references see 'Snakes': http://thinkingthreads.com/KhoeSanAnimalTable2.html or http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-000-23-1326/outputs/Read/59ce4318-34c7-40de-a025-0d634198fec0 (accessed February 22, 2013).

[16] Laidler claimed the only venom not used was that of the puff adder that 'rots the flesh', cf. P.W. Laidler, "The magic medicine of the Hottentots," *South African Journal of Science*, 25,1928: 438; Hans Kaufmann "Die Auin. Ein Beitrag zur Buschmannforschung", *Mitteilungen aus den deutschen Schutzgebieten*, 23, 1910: 135-60 (90); Schapera, *Khoisan Peoples*: 410; Notes of Dagmar Wagner-Robertz, MS.

[17] For example: Edward Alexander, An Expedition of Discovery into the Interior of Africa, vol.1, London, Colburn, 1838: 83; John Campbell, *Travels in South Africa, undertaken at the request of the London Missionary Society: being a narrative of a second journey in the interior of that country*, 2 vols., London, Westley, 2nd vol., 1822: 441; Peter Möller, *Journey in Africa through Angola, Ovamboland and Damaraland 1895-1896*, transl. from the original Swedish ed. of 1899 by Ione and Jalmar Rudner, Cape Town, Struik, 1974: 152.

[18] 'Cannā' is an antiquated spelling of a KhoeSan adapted word for cannabis. In Khoekhoegowab this is 'xana', cf. Wilfried Haacke and Eliphas Eiseb, *A Khoekhoegowab Dictionary with an English-Khoekhoegowab Index*, Windhoek, Gamsberg Macmillan, 2002: 151.

[19] For example: Ju|'hoansi: remove the anus, dry and sniff it, the smell goes through the body and gives the ability to smell disease, to dance more and get into 'trance' and heal people. Possible archaic (|Kuntai |Gau, 26/5/2007);!Khoi ǁoi (Naro, 1/6/2007); Dawid Kruiper (ǂKhomani, 24/10/2007).

polecat anus is the sensory jolt they impart that 'opens' a healer. As it seems unlikely that burnt snake powder was very strong smelling and provided a similar jolt, sensory stimulation does not explain its use. If, however, we consider the rationale behind poison doctoring, we can begin to understand why snake powder may have been used in the dance. To gain a more complete picture of this use we must appreciate the position of the snake in KhoeSan culture and this is what we shall shortly turn to.

What is important to recognise in the 'inoculation' of poison doctors, as many ethnographers refer to it, is that the reasoning behind the practice has nothing to do with primitive ideas of immunity in a proto-scientific sense. The foundation of the practice lies in bestowing in people the essence (potency) of snakes, scorpions or spiders such that the person shares kinship with them and, as one of them, the creatures will not harm them. The idea is rooted in a family of KhoeSan beliefs linking perceptions of vitality, spirit and wind. These foundational ideas underpin a notion that every organism contains the divine breath of life.[20] This equates to its own wind or smell that holds its characteristics. This wind or smell of an organism can enter another person or animal where it lodges inside them in a positive sense by allowing that person to 'own' the source phenomenon and thereby to 'work with it'. An alternative to this is not the actual wind of the animal lodging in a person but rather that person recognising that they have an ability to 'work with' that particular phenomenon. They are 'that sort of person'. The idea is a complex one in which wind, as the breath of life, is in the blood and makes a person alive. A person's or animal's wind represents who they are as a batch of characteristics, some of which can change during their life by, for example, adding snake ownership. People can also become sick from too much wind in the body or by wind wafting over them from a person or animal that is 'too strong'. Wind sickness ranges from bad thoughts or stares carrying the malevolent essence of someone to the actual smell of strangers bringing AIDS, strong smelling menstruating women terminating a mother's pregnancy, to a snake smell causing death. It is similar wind ideas that are behind |Xam and wider KhoeSan beliefs that the smell of young women at the onset of menarche becomes dangerous around snakes, rain and water.[21]

When Qing speaks of taming eland and snakes, what he is referring to is the KhoeSan practice of 'owning', 'possessing' or having 'mastership' of an animal either by having its wind essence inside them or by being the sort of person who can 'work with them'. Qing's example relates to rain animals worked with in an altered state of consciousness but it is based on how KhoeSan work in the tangible world. Variations of this idea are found in different contexts where a person takes on the qualities of something else. The range of contexts is considerable. In addition to the ability of poison doctors to resist snake-bites it might also include, for example, |Xam becoming a good hunter of springbok by wearing a springbok cap or children wearing ostrich eggshell beads to take

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[20] Chris Low, "Khoisan wind: hunting and healing", in: Elisabeth Hsu and Chris Low, (eds.), *Wind, Life, Health: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2008: 65-84.

[21] Ainsie Hoff, "Water Bull": 116.

on the strong qualities of the ostrich.[22] In terms of healing, ideas of ownership are fundamental to how many healers work. Those who work with the polecat rub themselves with the animal. This gives them the animal's 'wake up quality', based on its extreme smell, like smelling salts. Those who dance the eland dance draw the wind of the animal to themselves to work with its potent qualities. In Katz's account of Ju|'hoan healing he noted Tikay's claims that he worked with spirit animals, the kite and puff adder. The idea of spirit animals is just another way of thinking about possessing and working with animal winds.[23] Across these KhoeSan groups some healers have particular animal winds inside them that enable them to 'work with' the strengths of those specific animals. One !Xun healer claimed that he had twenty four such 'defenders' or */gais*. When he started healing he would call on his strongest */gais*, the rain lion and the snake. If these did not work he would then start working with different combinations, maybe the snake and the elephant.[24]

The word */gais* is used predominantly in north central Namibia but has deep roots in KhoeSan healing.[25] (Low 2008:79). The idea of having */gais* overlaps with ideas of having spirits or winds. At a more everyday level it equates to having different talents or gifts to do or be something including, for example, an ability to dance or sing or an ability to heal using a particular animal's strengths. People know they have a particular */gais* either because it is inherited, formally given to them by a healer, or it is divinely given through an event, such as being struck by lightning or a strange encounter with an animal which they recognise as meaningful at the time, or to which they later attribute changes they have noticed in themselves. People feel their */gais*, or hear it or see it manifest in a particular skill they seem to have, such as hunting a particular animal. The idea of */gais* sits within wider understandings of what constitutes a person. The meteorological conditions at a person's birth, for example, give people a relationship and a measure of influence on particular types of weather. Biesele provides a further example in her observation that if a person survives a snake-bite it is thought that they are not only, "a lucky sort of person", but that the snake "goes with them".[26] This is another way of saying they 'work with' the snake. When the |Xam spoke of owning an animal and feeling the animal through 'presentiments' they were speaking of feeling the

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[22] J. Francis Thackeray, "Disguises, animal behaviour and concepts of control in relation to rock art of Southern Africa", *Goodwin Series*, South African Archaeological Society, vol. 4, New Approaches to Southern African Rock Art, 1983: 38-43 (39-40); Chris Low, "Birds and KhoeSān: Linking spirits and healing with day-to-day life", *Africa*, 81 (2), 2011: 295-313.

[23] Richard Katz, *Boiling Energy: Community Healing among the Kalahari Kung*, Cambridge Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982: 272f.

[24] Aibi Haitua (!Xun, 8/8/2001).

[25] Chris Low, *Khoisan Medicine in History and Practice*, Köln, Köppe, 2008: 79f.

[26] Megan Biesele, *Women like Meat: the Folklore and Foraging Ideology of the Kalahari Ju|'hoan*, Witwatersrand, Witwatersrand University Press, 1993: 107.

animal inside them in ways that were grounded in ideas of 'talents' and sharing wind and smell.[27]

Due to translation and structuring problems, it is difficult to be definitive as to what Qing really meant in his discussion with Orpen. The way Qing's account of the shaman catching the Rain Snake moves to a description of shamans dancing and taking snake charms seems to suggest that the two were linked; that snake charm medicine would boost the shaman's power to catch the Water Snake and snake powder was taken by shamans to enhance their healing skills.

In terms of the first idea, given our understanding of how 'taking' snake confers kinship, wind and control, taking snake charms to catch the snake *par excellence*, the Water Snake, would seem entirely likely. This raises the possibility that those who already had strong snake wind, the poison doctors, may have also been specialists at catching the Rain Snake. Historically there is clear evidence that poison doctors existed amongst Bushmen in the later nineteenth century when Orpen and Bleek were working with Qing and the |Xam respectively. As early as 1827 a traveller, George Thompson, for example, recorded the opinion of Nel, the Veld-Commandent in the Roggeveld, at "Bloem Fonteyn", that he believed the manufacture of Bushman poison had "much improved" in the last forty years. It included the poison of the most venomous snakes mixed with vegetable and mineral material. He further noted that "slang-meesters (serpent masters)" are found amongst the Bushmen, "who possess the power of charming the fiercest serpents and of readily curing their bite. These charmers, it seems, can communicate to others their powers and their invulnerability by putting them through a regular course of poison eating."[28]

Apart from the reminder that even something thought so traditional to the Bushmen as arrow poison might shift in the variegations of history, Nel's comments, together with our earlier references, indicate that at least from the early nineteenth century there were prominent snake doctors. Furthermore, given the number of references in the wider ethnography from this period onwards and the widespread recent persistence of the practice, it seems highly likely that poison doctors existed in far earlier times and their late appearance reflects the partiality of ethnography more than their absence or presence. Similarly, the healing dance, a very prominent feature of the culture was not, for example, even hinted at until the 1770s and did not become readily apparent until well into the nineteenth century although it is thought to have existed for possibly thousands of years.[29]

Whilst the superficial nature of early ethnography makes it is impossible to say for certain whether or not these early poison doctors were also shamans, broader evidence suggests, like Thomson's reference, that poison doctors in the past were similar to more recent poison doctors; simply members of the community who sought immunity to snake

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[27] Wilhelm H. I. Bleek and Lucy C. Lloyd, *Specimens of Bushman Folklore*, London, Allen, 1911: 330-337.

[28] George Thompson, *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*, London, Colburn, 1827: 224.

[29] Low, *Khoisan Medicine*, 84-111.

poison and possibly the ability to treat snake-bite victims. This leaves us with the likelihood that it was more specific shamans who worked with the rain and took snake medicine in order to capture delete of the Water Snake.

Perhaps though, rather than look for specific historical characters with rigid roles as shamans, poison doctors, healers or otherwise, we might be better served drawing our conclusions by referencing recent KhoeSan behaviour in which roles are more fluid. In recent contexts Bushmen shamans are simply people who dance and are interested in such matters and their interest may come and go as might their ability or 'gift'. Similarly healers are people who tend to know how to treat a small selection of illnesses and are not often distinctive specialists. Different people treat different ailments and the healing roles and responsibilities are shared among the community. Thus assuming rigid vocational structures would appear not to represent the sort of plurality of identity and fluidity of practice that is inherent in Bushmen life.

Rather than trying to pin down precise social roles it is more useful to recognise that poison doctors, and healers who work with the spirit of the snake, operationalize a socially shared and mutually understood way of thinking about snakes and their relationship to life. With this in mind, it is important to understand the nature and range of ideas about snakes and how they relate to people. Then one must recognize that the KhoeSan probably engaged with these ideas in different ways in different historical contexts, in which different nuances and variations would have shifted between the practical and conscious foreground and background. At the very least there is enough evidence of the homogeneity of snake relationships across the distant and more recent past of KhoeSan to treat the subject as a shared set of nuanced ideas and practices.

In the following I wish to draw on the wider anthropology and folklore of the KhoeSan to demonstrate that snakes have a significant, if diminishing, role in KhoeSan life because they are so fundamentally embedded in KhoeSan ontology and epistemology. At the heart of what follows lies the recognition of the centrality of transformation as the definition of life. Essentially, medicine is an attempt to transform life in a desirable fashion. Snakes are significant and may have been called upon more extensively in older dances because of their polysemic potent properties, prominent amongst which is their transformational capacity. Qing related how men who were transformed into snakes were struck with a stick which caused their human body to emerge, leaving a snake skin on the ground.[30] Leaving a sloughed skin is powerful evidence of powers of change. The shamanistic salience of this is indicated by Ju|'hoansi Bushmen using the same word, *thúrú*, for shamanic transformation into a lion and the sloughing of a snake's skin. There is therefore a sense in which Qing's dancers may not have been seeking to be 'snake's people' or to own snakes, but were opening themselves up to use the transformational potency of snakes and the Rain Snake as part of their wider healing endeavours . At the same time though, snakes were also explicitly related to sickness as indicated in one of

[30] Orpen, "Glimpse": 5.

Orpen's footnotes: "they have, in case of sickness, something which seems like pythonic and phallic worship in dances conducted by men initiated in certain mysteries."[31]

Water snakes, divinity and life

KhoeSan N|uu speakers referred to a pan after rainfall as having */qe*.[32] It is the life force known through the experience of growth. This fits well within wider KhoeSan appreciations of life as a process of divine growth linked in turn to food, strength, fertility and a quality of reaching upwards evident in standing and growing. The KhoeSan story of the Moon and the Hare emphasises this essential existential linking of life to rising and falling.[33] Both water and snakes are intrinsically tied to the knowledge of this life force and its flipside, death. If there is one thing that brings life and facilitates growth, it is water. Dia!kwain told Bleek that when the people lead the water-cow and cut it up so that its blood falls as rain, the *lock uije* (an onion like plant) comes out and feeds the people.[34] The rain brings growth and people survive.

Life flows in the water of thirst-quenching rain, in 'watery' seminal fluid and in blood. Yet, a heart may have too much water, pans dry up and blood drains and stops flowing. Then death is sure to follow. Further, terrifying life-threatening storms appear and bouts of cold and rain chill KhoeSan causing serious ill health and respiratory problems.

Amongst KhoeSan snakes are intimately associated with water at a practical and divine level, from where they are found, to when they are active and to divine water-bringing associations. Hoff envisages that these good and bad aspects of water underpinned an older common origin of Khoekhoe and Bushmen hunter-gatherer ideas that remained visible in the |Xam beliefs of the Water Bull and the Water Snake. Both creatures are associated with the land and the sky although the sky is more their domain. They are both sources of rain and ground water. Lightning and thunder are particularly associated with the Water Bull. Despite this, the Water Bull is thought more benign and the snake more malevolent. In contrast Hoff determines the Nama around the Orange River region attribute lightning to their god Tsui||goab and although they recognise a link between giant water snakes and the presence of water they would not beseech the earthly snake for rain.[35]

Orpen's article lends further weight to the notion that not just the Water Bull but snakes were also considered responsible for water in the past. Qing related that: "when those

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[31] Ibid.: 3

[32] Crawhall notes this is a dental click '|' a pharangeal vowel marker 'q' and the vowel. It can also be spelt |eq or |geq (pers. com. 23/5/12).

[33] For analysis of the story see Mathias Georg Guenther, *Trickster and Trancers: Bushman Religion and Society*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999: 126-133.

[34] Bank, *Bushmen* : 306; Bleek, "Rainmaking", in: Pippa Skotnes,(ed.), CD accompanying *Claim to the Country: the Archive of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd*, Cape Town, Jacana, 2007: Notebooks BC_151_A1_4_027, 'Rainmaking': 2552.

[35] Hoff, "Water Snake"; idem, "Water Bull".

snakes came back they would fill the country with water".[36] Taking up Schmidt's argument, Hoff proposes that the aerial Water Snake is a much older idea than the Water Bull because ideas of the Water Snake are far more widespread.[37] Developing her chronology further, Hoff suggests the Water Bull is a variation on earlier ideas of rain animals as antelope mixed with cattle. Before antelope-cattle they were depicted as antelopes, and earlier still, as Turos. Despite Hoff arguing otherwise, there is much to suggest that Turos, the original rain animal, is rain thought of as a python.

Turos is something both Schmidt and Hoff encountered in their fieldwork. Schmidt heard of Turos predominantly amongst Namibian Nama of Gibeon, whilst Hoff encountered Turos amongst Nama and ǂKhomani San of the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park region. Turos was variously described to Hoff as a round thing or having snake like form or being like a cow. The Nama believed Turos to have lived or originated in the sky and thought it came down with a thunderbolt.[38] Hoff recognises that ideas of Turos overlap with the idea of a snake in the sky but prefers to think of Turos as a vague more rounded rain animal, perhaps older than the snake, on the basis that the 's' suffix on Turos indicates roundness, thickness and width. A 'b' suffix denotes a slender, and by implication phallic, snake like quality.[39] Hence, Turob, not Turos, would indicate a snake.

Although Hoff sees the Water Snake as one possible manifestation of Turos, what she does not signal is that the word *turos*, which is partly comprised of the word *tu* for rain, means python in Khoe. [40] Furthermore, Hoff argues against Turos being a snake, on the grounds that the 's' suffix denotes un-snakelike roundness, thickness and width.[41] It must be remembered, however, that the python, whilst long, has an enormous round girth that holds voluptuous female connotations amongst the KhoeSan.

Identifying Turos as the python in the sky was something explicitly done by Hendrik 'Buks' Kruiper, of the ǂKhomani.[42] Buks related a story he asserted was real, in which a male and female snake fought in the sky sending lightning and large slippery rain drops to the ground. The story is highly reminiscent of what Hoff describes as the Rain Bull and the Water Snake fighting in the sky but emphasises a core importance of the snake.

Extending our investigation further we see that Buk's linking of a giant aerial snake associated with water is only one of a number of recent beliefs that revolve around giant aerial snakes, rain and fertility. Within these beliefs it is plausible that the python could be the snake, Water snake and divine healing / sickness snake. The idea of Turos as a giant snake in the sky certainly seems alive in the beliefs of the Hai||om who describe fabulous flying snakes, hundreds of metres long that feed in the mountains of Namibia's

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[36] Orpen, "Glimpse": 5.

[37] Schmidt, "Rain Bull"; Hoff, "Water Bull": 123.

[38] Hoff, "Water Bull": 113, 120.

[39] Ibid.: 123.

[40] Cf. Haacke and Eiseb, *Khoekhoegowab* : 134; Schmidt, "Rain Bull": 207.

[41] Hoff, "Water Bull": 123.

[42] Hendrik Kruiper, 15/6/2009. Buks also sadly passed away during the writing of this paper.

Otavi region.[43]It is however in the folklore of the Ju|'hoansi that the metaphorical links of the python with water and birth really become explicit.

Biesele recounts Ju|'hoansi Bushmen male and female creation stories. The former concerns the magical fire at which people were branded to become the original animals. The latter concerns a "lovely python girl" who is tricked by a jackal into falling into a spring where she becomes stuck. In her absence the symbolically barren jackal intends to sleep with the snake's husband, the kori bustard, but, wise to the ruse, the kori bustard kills the jackal. The python is then rescued from the spring. In some versions the python gives birth whilst lying in the spring. Biesele interprets the story as a restoration of social order following "a kind of birth-seclusion". The links between fecundity and water are clearly central to the story in which "[t]he python is all a woman should be" including quiet, helpful, slow of gait, beautiful, pregnant and sometimes sweet smelling.[44]

Evidence that ealier Khoekoe also associated snakes with their origins is provided by the philologist Hahn who cited an old Korana belief that the snake was together with the first man on earth. Hahn noted that the popularity of this belief suggests a non-biblical origin.[45]

Furthermore, the Damara in the Sesfontein region of Namibia and the Hai||om living to the east of them, believe a great snake lives in the sky that is associated with their divinity. It is significant that in this region, despite over a century of Christian influence, many people will offer apparently contradictory ideas of their divinity figures. They will say 'we have only one god, he is good and bad'. God creates life and god is the ultimate cause of sickness and death. At the same time though, people who assert there is only one god will also distinguish G||âuab, or less commonly G||amab (||Gamab), as 'the devil' or 'Satan', who brings sickness, death, arguing and fighting as opposed to Abo or !Khuba, the good god.

In the 1970s Wagner-Robertz noted Damara beliefs that present a complex relationship between the snake and the divinity, suggesting that the snake is the bad god who sits with the good god ||Gamab, or perhaps that ||Gamab is more intrinsically connected to the snake. ||Gamab sends the lightning and rain. He sends the power and instructions to heal. ||Gamab lives in the sky with a big snake.

> He lies on that snake. This snake is the heart of ||Gamab, it is his homestead. The snake in whose place ||Gamab lives is very bad, evil and poisonous. A healer goes to ||Gamab's place to treat a sick man. [...] At ||Gamab's place there are a lot of women, children and elderly people. They dance around the house of the snake, round ||Gamab's house.[46]

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[43] Cf. Schmidt, "Rain Bull": 208.

[44] Biesele, *Women*: 134-135.

[45] Theophilus Hahn, *Tsuni // Goam. The Supreme Being of the Khoikhoi*, London, Trübner, 1881: 62.

[46] Dagmar Wagner-Robertz, MS: 51f.

Ilse Schatz recorded similar beliefs from the Hai||om healer Garugu ||Khumob. ||Khumob described ||Gamab as having a leopard on his left and a big snake with three eyes on the right. Sometimes ||Gamab would send 'dragons' to earth to bite people. When ||Khumob collapsed in the dance, as if dead, "his soul would go on a long string to ||Gamab. ||Gamab sends an eland with a big rope to take him up to a big tree". Schatz related that ||Khumob became a healer when, as a young man, he had once been walking in the bush in "a fine rain", looking for food. Whilst walking he encountered a ghost woman named Kaindaus who "beat him up" because he refused to marry her and have children with her.[47]

Men being visited and molested by naked women spirits in the night is known across the northern Namibian region and beyond. Similarly, being beaten up by spirits is a repeated theme in KhoeSan healing. Amongst the Damara, healers rush from a healing dance returning maybe hours later with blood streaming from their nose, reporting that they fought with ||Gamab. This nose bleeding from spirit fighting is rare in other recent KhoeSan contexts but highly reminiscent of that found in rock art and |Xam accounts. Schatz's reference to Kaindaus is significant because it seems highly probable that her Kaindaus is a variation of *Keinaus* or *Kai /aus*, meaning 'big snake' in Khoe and holding connotations of divine power.[48] In this account we therefore have a sexually aggressive woman ghost snake, sent by ||Gamab, in a fine 'female' rain. The story combines both the association of snakes with divinity and ideas still persistent across KhoeSan in the regions Hoff explored concerning the aggressive sexuality of large Water Snakes. In the Mier region of the Northern Cape, for example, people speak of snakes in local dams and in the Orange River, which lure attractive humans of the opposite sex into the water. The gendering of the rain is also significant and is a common KhoeSan practice. Female rain is soft and fine, male rain hard and associated with thunder and lightning. In this story we therefore have similar juggling of dangerous cross gender attraction between snakes, water and people that we find in |Xam accounts relating to the attraction of rain to sweet smelling young girls and *buchu* perfume.[49]

In another, less direct, manner, ||Gamab relates to Damara healers and associated ideas of rain and snakes. Amongst the Damara a person becomes a healer by owning */nanu ǂoab* or 'rain wind'. The strongest healers are those who have been struck by lightning; the more strikes the stronger they are. The Damara describe lightning as 'beating' people and the idea overlaps with the notion of a spirit beating a person as it 'opens them' to its influence. At the same time lightning holds a sense of being a snake-bite. This is indicated in Schatz's note that ||Gamab sends 'dragons', a variation of the snake theme, to earth to bite people. Lightning is therefore a mechanism of sending things to earth akin, literally, to the poisonous, 'lightning' fast and transformative bite of a snake. When bitten or beaten by lightning, a person takes in the rain wind and is

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[47] Ilse Schatz pers. com.; Ilse Schatz, *Unter Buschleuten auf der Farm Otjiguinas*, Tsumeb, Schatz, 1993: 8.

[48] Cf. Schmidt, "Rain Bull": 210.

[49] Bleek and Lloyd, *Specimens*: 193-199; Hoff, "Water Snake": 31.

granted the ultimate transformative essence of life to become a healer; a person who transforms things.

There is evidence that this association between the divinity and snakes goes beyond the Damara and Hai||om as similar ideas are found amongst the Khwe from southern Angola. One Khwe man observed that: "The people say the python is healthy and is the belt of the Lord. The old people believed that snakes are from god." He continued to describe the beauty of the snake commenting elliptically that, "when you see the lightning, you will never see the snake again."[50]

Although there is little further evidence of KhoeSan working with aerial snakes to bring rain, there is a wider background to habits of beseeching or capturing personified rain that resonates with the |Xam personification of rain and the shamanistic spirit travelling to capture and slaughter the Rain Bull to shed its blood, which falls as rain.

Some Hai||om and ǂKhomani spoke of rainmaking practices held up to a decade ago that involved slaughtering an animal and dancing for rain. Unfortunately they could not elaborate on these practices. It is tempting, if speculative, to see this slaughter as having parallels with the cutting up of the Water Cow described by Dia!kwain. Both recent and |Xam contexts could however represent wider Southern African practices rather than anything of particular KhoeSan derivation.[51]

In what seems a modern variation of |Xam healers travelling to a water source to capture the Rain Bull, there are Hai||om healers that travel to */Nanus* the female Rain Goddess in the clouds to steal the rain. One healer, Paul Hawabeb, described two types of cloud, grey ones without rain and others that make water droplets. When thunder happens the door of the rain cloud opens and those with the */nanu* (rain) */gais* (rain wind or spirit) can enter. People with the rain */gais* describe the cloud as a house with rooms. If you have the */gais* and make it inside the house the interior becomes light. For those who make it to the house without the */gais* it remains dark. Those without the rain */gais* must go through the window like a thief. When Paul went to */Nanus* he was "thrown down" by lightning and he has since been too frightened to return.[52] A further Hai||om healer, Kadisen, told anthropologist Ute Dieckman and film maker Andy Botelle a very similar account of stealing the rain from */Nanus*.[53]

The polysemic and ambivalent snake

Being aware of life as a process of growth, like that which follows rain, is a central pole in KhoeSan thinking. However, behind growth lies a more fundamental idea of life as transformation. It is an outlook that resonates with ethnographer Scott's Cree Indian

[50] Carlos Munawngo, 27/11/2006.

[51] Schmidt, "Rain Bull": 203.

[52] Paul Hawabeb, 22/7/2001.

[53] Pers. com. 2010; see film: *Journey of a Rain Shaman*, directed and produced by Andy Botelle and Robert Scott, Mamokobo Video and Research, 2008.

definition of life as a process of "continuous birth".[54] The importance of ideas of transformation to the KhoeSan and their related knowledge that the world is inherently fluid, is revealed in the persistent recurrence in KhoeSan folklore and origin stories of animals taking the form of people and vice versa, just as people and snakes do in Qing's stories. Silberbauer adds further evidence of this fluidity in his analysis of the grammatical possibilities of |Gwi language which allow the understanding that one phenomenon may hold the properties of another.[55] In the ideas of people owning talents, winds and smells that are at once, human, divine and animal, we see how the template that underpins identity is ambiguous. The template holds ingredients that under different circumstances can distil or crystallise into different types of life; divinity lives as wind in humans, a man becomes a lion, a person becomes a ghost or a snake that behaves strangely or a snake by a grave is recognized as the ghost of a relative.[56] Similarly, KhoeSan divinities hold different characteristics. What they are is a vessel of the essentially good and bad ambiguity of life and its inherently perplexing, creative and destructive nature.

The importance of wind and smell in KhoeSan thought is a direct reflection of its key role in their hunter-gatherer experience of life. Out of their experience come ways of thinking about the invisible connections they perceive between people and the environment, including between people and snakes. Wind reveals the presence of hunter or prey and carries information between the two parties and the presence or absence of breath-wind, witnessed with some frequency at the death of animals and people, reveals the divine gift of life and its cessation. Given the important influence of the environment and experience in KhoeSan thinking, it is perhaps not surprising that the inherently ambiguous, dangerous and consequently intriguing snake also plays a significant role in their ideas. The main evidence for this rests in the broader connections we have covered between snakes, fertility and folklore. Arguing the point further is admittedly difficult in view of the unarticulated nature of such fundamental ideas and the variation and fluidity of KhoeSan thought. Some KhoeSan did, however, volunteer ideas of snakes. The similarity between these ideas, those presented earlier and those found in cultures the world over, suggests that KhoeSan snake relationships may tell us something profound about what it means to be human.

A small number of KhoeSan explicitly compared the cyclical rebirth of the moon to the cyclic replacement of a snail's shell and the transformation of a sloughing snake. When supplemented with wider folklore beliefs this explicit linking of the snake to chains of rebirth and transformation is reminiscent of the Ouroboros, the image of a snake found in numerous ancient cultural contexts wherein the snake is shown swallowing its tail. The Ouroboros is largely associated with primordial cyclic unity or the recreation of life. A

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[54] Cited by Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Oxford, Routledge, 2011: 69.

[55] George B. Silberbauer, *Hunter and Habitat in the Central Kalahari Desert*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981: 132.

[56] Bleek and Lloyd, *Specimens* : 428f.; Wagner-Robertz, MS: 52, interview with Frederik !Gaeb (Damara).

number of Naro offered a further theme, also found more widely, concerning G||ãua, their evil divinity figure. These Naro proclaimed G||ãua was like the snake because the snake has a forked tongue, the suggestion being that the snakes tongue relates to deceptive good and bad qualities and probably the dangers of certain ideas or words that come to a person. In the example mentioned earlier of Damara and Khwe referring to a snake as a belt of their god, we are again presented with a theme that crops up in all manner of cultures. The archaic Gorgon, for instance, wore a belt of entwined serpents that has been interpreted as a fertility symbol and, similarly, the West African derived Voudou god Mami Wata is typically depicted with a large python around her waist.

When considering KhoeSan ideas we should be open to a complex story of historical acculturation as informed by revisionist Kalahari historians.[57] Yet, unless KhoeSan history is entirely derivative and divorced from context, we must take into account their particularly rich sensual knowledge of snake form and behaviour. Besides skin sloughing and a forked tongue the snake provides all manner of distinctive characteristics which have worked their way into KhoeSan snake relationships at different times and places. These range from snakes killing by poison and constriction, having a dry skin that looks wet, their flowing legless movement, their whispering conspiratorial hiss or perhaps the interwoven seething of a nest of snakes as a powerful representation of ripeness or chaos.

Identifying ideas of talents, winds and smells sheds light on KhoeSan notion of identity, including ||Gamab with the snake around his waist. The snake and god go together, they are separate but as they work with each other they have part of the other within themselves, essentially as wind or spirit. This possibility of sharing qualities between people and people and natural phenomena is further reflected in linguistic relationships. Vedder observed, for example, that *//gami*, meaning water in Khoe, derives from ||Gamab, the giver of water.[58] When northern Khoe speakers take in, or embody, 'spirit' defenders and work with them they refer to them as diminutives of ||Gamab called *//gamas* or *//gabas* and */gaiga*.[59] These are things 'thrown down' by the lightning. They are the things that go with god, as is a snake belt, the snake being both the disorientating voice bound to god and the fertility of water.

The negative connotations of the snake are linked to KhoeSan belief that all sickness ultimately comes from a more or less defined divine figure. Many, including Damara, Naro and G|wi, see the mechanism of transference as the divinity shooting down invisible arrows of sickness. Alternatively, in Ju|'hoan terms, 'the wind of god' brings sickness. At the same time sickness may be caused by other things, principally dead

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[57] For recent insight on revisionist history and the 'the Kalahari Debate' see Edwin Wilmsen et al., "To see ourselves as we need to see us: ethnography's primitive turn in the early cold war years', *Critical African Studies*, 1, 2009: 1-75.

[58] Vedder cited by Schapera, *Khoisan Peoples* : 397.

[59] This array of words may well relate to ||gápà [' ||gabas'] (b and p being interchangeable) and ||gáwà [g ||ãua], both meaning 'strike of lightning', cf. Haacke and Eiseb, *Khoekhoegowab* : 692.

people, whose closeness to the divinity G||ãua is revealed in their name, the *g//ãuasi*. Other significant causes of sickness are extremes of weather, anger and violence, contact with 'smelly' and potent people and animals, 'witchcraft' or sickness from doing the wrong thing and not working well with the potency inherent in the world.

In Andersson's account of travel in central Namibia in the mid-nineteenth century, he recorded that Nama healers, 'kaiaob' [!gai aob or !gai aob] believed ailments were usually "caused by a great snake (toros) having fired an arrow into the stomach".[60] In this example we find not only Turos as the cause of sickness, and as such an aspect of god, but invisible arrows as one of the ways in which sickness is thought to travel. As arrows carry poison in the tangible world, invisible arrows are seen as the carriers of sickness of unknown origin. As such they supplement 'wind' as a key concept of invisible connection. The idea of arrows is also present in wider healing scenarios when *n/om*, the healing substance of the Ju|'hoansi, is conceived as arrows and other KhoeSan speak of pulling invisible sickness arrows out of people.

Andersson's Turos example shows how the idea of the snake is mapped into a KhoeSan theme of sickness causation linking snakes, arrows, lightning and wind. All are mechanisms of painfully transferring dangerous essence at a divine and human scale. The G||ana provide a less specific example in their belief in Kaonxa 'the master of all illnesses', bringer of violent rain and wind who became a big snake.[61]. Orpen's footnote regarding pythonic worship provides a further tantalising flipside to this association, suggesting that the python was worked with for healing purposes.

It is testament to the raw potency of snakes that links between sickness and snakes go further than just the snake-bite, although fear of the snake-bite remains central to the association between snakes, danger and evil. A related source of sickness is simply the fright of encountering a snake. Juggling ideas of wind transference, the fright enters a person and carries the snake with it. A cure entails the snake being removed by a healer. Similarly, just the wind or smell of a snake can also move into a person. Historically reports of this range from the |Xam archive, where snake smell caused paralysis and a smelly plant *shó-/õã* was used to repel the snakes, to Alexander's 1835 observations of a massive snake that was angered by the smell of people and whose smell could kill, unless a person vomited immediately.[62] The need to vomit out the smell or divine wind is similarly found in the treatment of both snake-bites and a lightning

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[60] John Andersson, *Lake Ngami; or Explorations and Discoveries during Four Years Wanderings in the Wilds of South Western Africa*, 2nd ed., London, Hurst and Blackett, 1856: 255.

[61] Valiente-Noailles cited by Anne Solomon, "Images, words and worlds: The |Xam testimonies and the rock art of the Southern San", in: Piappa Skotnes, (ed.), *Claim to the Country: the Archive of Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd*, Cape Town, Jacana, 2007: 150-159 (154).

[62] Wilhelm H. I. Bleek, *A brief account of Bushman folk-lore and other texts : second report concerning Bushman researches, presented to both Houses of Parliament of the Cape of the Good Hope*, London, Trübner, 1875: 18; Edward Alexander cited by P. W. Laidler, "Manners, Medicine and Magic of the Cape Hottentots", MS, University of Cape Town, BCS401, 1923: 127.

strike. A !Ko woman described how one must tread on the stomach of someone struck by lightning so they might vomit it out.[63]

In the 1970s Schmidt similarly observed that Nama, Damara, Hai||om and neighbouring Herero and Basters all thought the breath and smell of giant snakes extremely dangerous.[64] The belief still has some currency and ranges as far as the Ju|'hoansi. In recent contexts simply treading on snake bones is also known to confer sickness through transference of the snakes smell or wind. There is considerable overlap between these various ideas and those relating to smell and rain amongst the |Xam. Rain is attracted, placated and angered by smells of people and *buchu*.[65]

Just as these dangerous snake qualities involve movement of the snakes attributes into people, so too do the creative, fecund aspects of snakes, water, growth and life also move into people in smell and wind. It is well known that the eland has a special status amongst many San groups. Like the snake, it is the polysemic quality of the eland that makes it so special. Among the many characteristics attributed to the eland, including its extraordinary size and strength, a reputed propensity to cry at its death and the male's enormous dewlap, it is the sweet smelling tasty fat resources that lend the animal particular salience. However, it is less widely known that, at least some Ju|'hoansi believe that eland fat is thought to derive from the python. A Ju|'hoansi lady, Tixai, explained that the eland "gets its fat from the python. The fat of the python comes with the wind and goes into the eland. The python gives him the fat. If the eland is not fat, the python has taken it all."[66] This seems to express an ontological primacy of the python.

When discussing eland, academics have identified fat as a sign of fecundity, femininity and plenty. These same associations are equally applicable to the snake. Collectively, the feminine, voluptuous, fecund aspect of the snake combines with its masculine, fertile and penetrative quality to contribute to a profound association between snakes and life, creation and growth. This balance of the male and female qualities of the snake are apparent in widespread knowledge that to dream of snakes reveals a pregnancy at home. A distinctly nurturing side also comes to the fore in an idea, also found in many other cultures, that snakes may suckle breast-feeding mothers. Regardless of whether these sorts of beliefs are 'indigenous' or not, they have currency because they fit so well with wider deeply held beliefs and practices.

As noted in our example of Khwe belief, people find the snake beautiful. Amongst the wider KhoeSan this beauty reflects an appreciation of the python's curves, fatness and rich colouring. The archaeologist Malan has explored similar attributes of snakes in a San rock art representation of a puff adder. Malan interprets the puff adder as having

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[63] Machaba Kgosile, 23/5/2007.

[64] Schmidt, "Rain Bull": 208.

[65] Dorothea Frances Bleek, "Beliefs and customs of the |Xam Bushmen. Part V: The rain", *Bantu Studies*, 7 (1), 1933: 297-312 (300).

[66] Tixai ǂGkao, 24/8/2001.

supernatural rain potency and she links this to the snake's habit of basking on the ground in the rainy season, its swimming ability and its rich rainbow colouring which linked the snake to the sky and rain in the minds of the |Xam. Malan finds further evidence for the snake's supernatural status in its large quantities of fat.[67]

What Malan has to say of the puff adder also applies, if not more so, to the python. This reminds us of the inherent variability and flexibility in KhoeSan ideas. All snakes are probably considered to have a certain rain quality and are associated to some degree with potency and 'supernatural' qualities. Large and dangerous snakes seem of special relevance but are not the only focus.

The association between fat and specifically eland fat and women is something that has been well recognised in the literature.[68] In the Ju|'hoansi eland bull dance, girls at menarche are deliberately associated with eland, as fat creatures, that can enhance their fecundity. Thinking of this association as 'sharing wind', as the eland and python do, lends insight to interpretation based on 'ritual symbolism'. Amongst the Ju|'hoansi when the healers dance the dance of a particular animal, they use a dance that works for them and enables them to 'open up'. Some think of this as the wind of the animal coming to help them. In the eland bull dance the eland fat comes to the young girls. In a replication of the movement of fat between the python and the eland, the eland dance confers attributes of fecundity, rain and plenty.

Fat is widely used in KhoeSan medicine and specific fats are used to bestow the qualities of the animal from which they come. Strong smelling fat is particularly potent and this partly relates to the central importance of smell in KhoeSan medicine. Things that smell strong are full of wind and are inherently potent. The link between smell and fat was noted as far back as 1786 when Sparrman observed that animal fat was used medicinally and the stronger smelling the species the better.[69] As indicated in the use of *buchu*, *sâi* or *sa* in healing scenarios, the KhoeSan use strong smelling things to 'wake people up' and 'open them up'. As Sullivan also observes, these *buchu* substances are also considered inherently female and are used as perfume.[70] If we remember that perfumes are all about attraction and repulsion and that the origins of many familiar perfumes are strong smelling scent glands of animals, there is a sense in which use of fat amongst the KhoeSan sits within the same category as perfume use. In contexts of

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[67] Malan, "Linking Sex": 6, 8.

[68] J. Davis Lewis-Williams, *Believing and Seeing: Symbolic Meaning in Southern San Rock Paintings*, London, Academic Press, 1981: 48; Camilla Power and Ian Watts, "First gender, wrong sex", in: Henrietta Moore, Todd Sanders and Bwire Kaare, (eds.), *Those who Play with Fire: Gender, Fertility and Transformation in East and Southern Africa*, London, Athlone Press, 1999: 101-132 (110-113).

[69] Anders Sparrman, *A voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, towards the Antarctic Polar Circle, and round the world, but chiefly into the country of the Hottentots and Caffres. From the year 1772, to 1776*, 2nd edition, London, G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1786: 150.

[70] Sian Sullivan, "Perfume and pastoralism: gender, ethnographic myths and community-based conservation in a former Namibian 'Homeland'", in: Dorothy L. Hodgson, (ed.), *Rethinking Pastoralism in Africa: Gender, Culture and the Myth of the Patriarchal Pastoralist*, Oxford, Curry, 2000: 140-180 (142-164).

snakes, smelly fat, smelly people and *buchu* all work as things that attract and repulse snakes, people and rain.

Returning to the context of poison doctors, the poison confers immunity because it is a storehouse of snake wind, the essence of the snake. As a !Xun man, Fernando Zolino explicitly stated: 'it is the smell of the snake that you put in you, the *//oh*'.[71] Laidler was similarly told by a poison doctor that snakes ran away from him because of his smell, which was held in his spittle and sweat. This is the explanation behind these secretions being curative for snakebite.[72] Evidence of the belief that fat, like snake poison, also carries animal wind, is found in the alternative practice of rubbing snake fat onto the skin instead of taking snake-poison, to confer immunity. Both mamba and python fat are considered particularly effective although, as 'the king of the snakes', the python possibly more so. Typically, a Ju|'hoansi man, |Khao |Gao, claimed that if he rubs python fat on his body snakes will not bite him and if he steps on a snake it will die. A Hai||om man declared that he knew python fat worked for him because he heard the snakes run away when he walked through the bush. Many people also use the fat of the large monitor lizard as an alternative to python fat 'snake repellent'. This reflects a wider notion of congruence between these two giant reptiles. It is one Schmidt also encounters in KhoeSan folklore where the monitor lizard is deemed the servant of the Water Snake. The monitor and the python, "go together".[73]

There may well be linguistic evidence for this link between fat, fecundity and rain. Khoe speakers call the fat monitor, *duba*. To get fat in Ju|'hoansi is *duba*. The fat eland is called *du*. As d and t are often interchangeable, getting fat may be the work of Tu, the rain and Turos the Rain Snake, or Duros as Vedder renders it.[74] Fat is pre-eminently, a rain thing, it reveals and bestows strength and growth. Amongst the Hai||om babies are accordingly rubbed in snake fat to imbue them with health and encourage strong growth.

As fat is something that holds the essence of the snake it not only bestows kinship with and potential protection from snakes, but it carries the potent transformative quality of the snake. Biesele identifies that fat, like honey and water, is potent because of its capacity to move between states; liquid, solid and in the case of water, steam.[75] Snake fat therefore represents a particularly potent transformative substance. Qing related how a chief was tricked into eating snake fat. This induced a nose bleed and his transformation into a snake.[76] In terms of shamans dancing for rain it would accordingly

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[71] Fernando Zolino, 11/6/2006.

[72] Laidler, "Magic Medicine": 438.

[73] Schmidt, "Rain Bull": 210. Morris' identification of a similar link between monitor lizards, the supreme being, clouds, lightning and rain in Malawi points to a wide Southern African context of such beliefs; cf. Brian Morris, *Animals and Ancestors: an Ethnography*, Oxford, Berg, 2000: 190f.

[74] Schmidt, "Rain Bull": 208.

[75] Biesele, *Women* : 86.

[76] Orpen, "Glimpse": 7.

make sense if they used snake extract to enable them to transform and travel to the Water Bull, the Water Snake, Turos, |Nanus, or some other cloud personification to take the rain. In healing dances *buchu* is often mixed with fat. If Qing's snake powder were mixed with snake or *duba* fat this would add further transformative potency.

Conclusion

An overriding message in Schmidt's analysis of KhoeSan folklore is that it is complicated.[77] Not only is the overlap between the KhoeSan and the wider local and global flow of ideas probably impossible to untangle but the variety and inconsistency of ideas just amongst the KhoeSan makes it hard to relate their beliefs systematically. It is, however, in these very problems that certain answers lie. The phenomenon of poison doctors captures a profound relationship between the KhoeSan, the environment and beliefs in ways that relate intimately to overlapping ideas of wind, divine spirit and breath found throughout recorded history. At the same time, KhoeSan relationships with the Water Snake and the Water Bull resonate with snakes and Water Bulls the world over. It would seem extraordinary if the spread and longevity of ideas of divine wind-spirits and Water Snakes, does not say something profound about human environmental relationships. What is particular to the KhoeSan, however, is the intimacy between environmental experience, knowledge and practice and the extent to which the snake holds and captures qualities that resonates at the heart of their cultures.

KhoeSan life hinges on an elaborate, deeply sensual but pragmatic knowledge of how the world works in terms of things that go together. Patterns are detected in everyday experience, and perceptions of similarity between phenomena underpin chains of association that shape KhoeSan language, ideas and actions. KhoeSan language reflects both their frames of reference and this go together quality. Hahn highlighted this interrelationship with reference to snakes in a way that reinforces the examples we have encountered. Hahn recognised links between a snake, */au-b*, 'the one who flows'; blood, */au-b*; rain, */au-ib*; streaming, */au-i*; and milk, */au*. Hahn further linked anger, */au*, as one who bleeds, or "has a bleeding heart" and the colour red, */ava*.[78] Pastor Eiseb, co-author with Haake of the first comprehensive Khoekhoegab dictionary, indicated to me that this linguistic relationship is more than naïve cherry picked word resemblance. As an example of how Khoe speakers think, Eiseb volunteered an explanation of how the arteries in the body are named after streams and where arteries visually emerge or become physically palpable, as at the wrist where the pulse is taken, they are named after a water-spring coming out of the ground. Significantly, this use of one familiar idea to explain another, whilst not in any way exceptional to the KhoeSan, indicates what their frames of reference are for understanding the world and how things of the world are connected. When a KhoeSan person is thinking about or dealing with a snake, there is a

[77] Schmidt, "Rain Bull"; Sigrid Schmidt, *Catalogue of the Khoisan Folktales of Southern Africa*, Hamburg, Buske, 1989.

[78] Hahn, *Tsuni //Goam* : 27, 78f.

multitude of shifting associations that might enter into their mind, ranging from fertility, water, fat and rain to lightning, arrows, smell, wind, sickness and destructive voices in the head. Biesele has observed that Ju|'hoansi sometimes speak in metaphors up to four times removed.[79] This is a linguistic way in which these chains of association are operationalized – bearing in mind that, as Ingold states, metaphors express real relational unities and not figuratively papered over dualities.[80] The practices of poison doctors represent a practical example of working with chains of relationship.

The form of the snake, and in particular the python, lends itself to an exceptional spectrum of associations. Its roundness, coupled with length, is related to gendered and personified cloud formations that become angry and beat a person with their lightning or bring rain and easy living. The lightning fast poisonous bite of a snake delivers divine will. As people who were recently hunter-gatherers, the KhoeSan remain acutely aware of the dangers of anger and violence or of the crucial implications of listening to the right voice in one's head. A |Xam Bushmen once told Bleek, "anger does not let the rain fall".[81] The forked tongue of the snake reveals the ambiguity of life and is associated with the voice and bite of the wrong voice, the angry voice that, like everything else, ultimately comes from the nature of life or god.

In the nineteenth century, the time of Qing, rural Bushmen still followed the lightning for rain and plenty. When the rain did not come things became critical. With the advent of farming, conservation and the establishment of military and police garrisons around the Kalahari at the end of the nineteenth century, bore holes appeared and water began to lose something of its criticality as Bushmen became increasingly entangled in developing Africa. Currently people do all manner of things to encourage rain including dancing, pleading to the clouds, burning the leaves of the *vetkat* tree (≠Khomani) and sticks of acacia (Hai||om), or even breaking the branches of the *!abu* tree (Hai||om). There is, however, much to suggest that requesting rain is becoming increasingly uncommon and that this follows a progression that gathered its momentum in the later nineteenth century. Similarly, despite the late visibility of the poison doctor in the ethnographic record, it seems highly likely that they are a far older phenomenon but also one that is disappearing.

Orpen's paper links snakes to Bushman 'healing' or 'trance' dances in two ways. The first is through the use of snake powder as a strategy for capturing the Rain Snake. The second is in his connection between pythonic worship and treating sickness. In recent contexts there is no similar evidence of shamanic charming of Rain Snakes and none of snake worship. However, when we contextualize these practices within past and recent KhoeSan culture it becomes apparent that the essential links highlighted by Qing, between snakes and healing and snakes and rain are part of a multi-threaded theme in which snakes, and particularly the python, sit within fundamental KhoeSan conceptions

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[79] Biesele, *Women*: 25.

[80] Tim Ingold, "Introduction", in: idem, (ed.), *What is an Animal?*, New York, Routledge, 1994: xxiv.

[81] Bleek, "Rainmaking": 2557.

of life and death. Focussing on snakes flags how what KhoeSan see and feel working around them manifests in their thinking and strategies.

Although the evidence is not sufficient to claim that in the past Bushmen used snakes prolifically in their healing and rain rituals, evidence gathered from a broader range of sources at least demonstrates a possible rationale and context for such use. Conclusions cannot be more than speculative. I suspect, however, that what Qing described were practices of using snakes that were a significant part of a shamanic repertoire which included other potent plant and animal substances. Given our wider evidence, it would seem particularly appropriate to use snake 'charms' to influence the Rain Snake. Equally though, snake body parts might have been important in wider shamanic work because of the snake's transformative and otherwise potent characteristics. In view of the homogeneity and longevity of ideas surrounding snakes and an earlier more critical role of rain, I strongly suspect that snakes would have featured more in past KhoeSan healing strategies than in recent times. Qing's snakes are the tip of an ice berg; how big that ice berg was is the difficult question.

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