

STRUCTURE AND FLUIDITY IN KHOISAN
RELIGIOUS IDEAS¹

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The extreme complexity of the whole pre-Bantu ethnology of South Africa manifests itself especially in research into the true nature of the ancient Bushman religion. It appears impossible to arrive at reliable conclusions without detailed inquiry also into the religion of the Hottentots and the Bergdama.

Wilhelm Schmidt (1929: 301)

Before I begin my discussion of Khoisan religious ideas, a few words about the theoretical perspective used in this paper may be of interest to some readers. Broadly, it is 'structuralist' and based on the idea of regional comparison as a key to the understanding of both the region as a whole and particular cultures within it (cf. de Heusch, 1982). The relevant structures are conceived neither as universal (as generally in the Lévi-Straussian sense of 'structure') nor as peculiar to specific societies or linguistic communities (as often in structural linguistics), but rather, as regionally-based. What earlier writers have described merely as cultural differences are seen here as part of this larger, regional structure of beliefs and practices—a structure of structures. To some degree, indigenous thinkers have an intuitive knowledge of this structure, but usually only in the sense that a native-speaker has a knowledge of his or her own language. Just as English-speakers (even small children) know how to use nouns and verbs correctly in the English language, so too the Bushmen, Khoekhoe and Damara know how to use religious ideas within the 'grammar' of the Khoisan religious system as a whole. This, of course, does not mean that they explicitly define the categories or formulate the rules of such a 'grammar'; as experts in their own cultures, they do not need to. Explication of that 'grammar' is the task of the structural anthropologist (Barnard, 1987).

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the prominent features of Khoisan religion in a regional-comparative framework, and with particular concern towards the translation of religious ideas and the understanding of religious conversion. The emphasis will be on belief rather than ritual, although the latter could no doubt be analysed in a similar vein (cf. W. Schmidt, 1929; Schapera, 1930: 395-99; S. Schmidt, 1986a).

Khoisan religious ideas

The Khoisan peoples are a linguistically diverse cluster of southern African groups, including both hunter-gatherers (Bushmen) and herders (Khoekhoe and Damara). Religious ideas, including concepts of God, the spirits, and the dead, as well as myths and ritual practices, are held in common across ethnic boundaries. Yet Khoisan religions are more than bundles of ideas. Such religions are characterised: (1) by structures which may be held constant, transformed, or inverted, through time or across ethnic boundaries, and (2) by a fluidity of religious belief and religious discourse which is sometimes difficult to define in purely structural terms.

In Khoisan society, especially in the case of the Bushmen, assimilation of new ideas is non-problematic, and religious notions have a fluid character which has led historically to cross-cultural uniformity and, at the same time, to intra-cultural diversity. In the case of the Khoekhoe and Damara, the greater rigidity of form has given rise to a greater tendency towards structural transformation, rather than fluidity of discourse, although both elements are present in these religions too. Ironically, the greater structural consistency of Khoekhoe and Damara religions seems to have made these peoples more, rather than less, receptive to Christian conversion.

The people traditionally classified by scholars as 'Northern Bushmen' (!Kung) and the various peoples traditionally classified as 'Southern Bushmen' (!xõ, ||xegwi, |Xam, and others) are extremely diverse linguistically, though all speak relatively isolating languages which in most cases are *not* prone to complicated taxonomy or to abstract expression. The so-called 'Central Bushman', on the other hand, speak *Khoe* languages, languages not traceably related to 'Northern' or 'Southern Bushman' ones, but related to Khoekhoe at a time depth of three to two thousand years (see, e.g.,

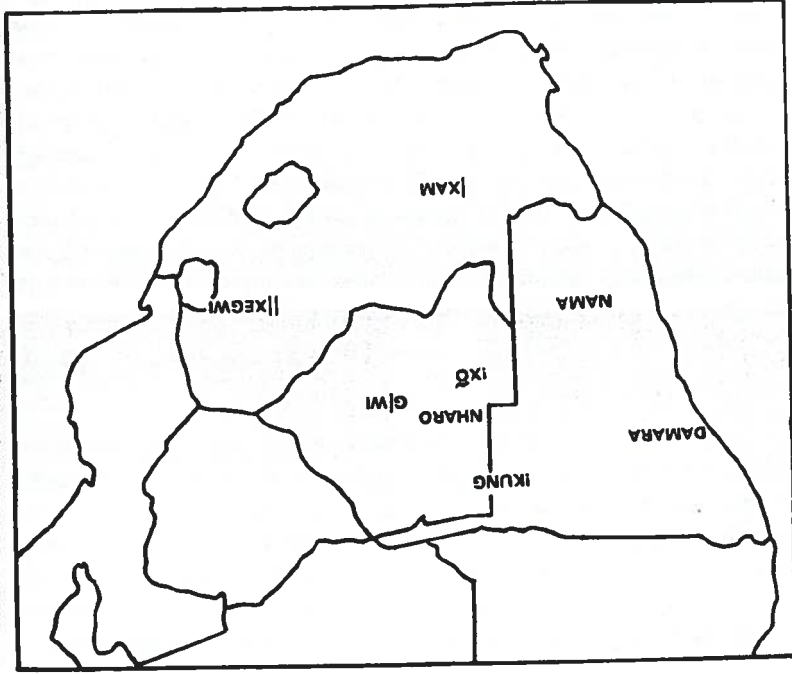


Figure 1. Map of southern Africa showing the locations of Khoisan groups mentioned in the text.

Köhler, 1966). Khoekhoe, Damara and *Central* Bushmen, are almost polysynthetic (i.e., both inflective and agglutinative) and much more prone to abstracteness. The *Central* Bushmen include two groups of special concern in this paper (the Nharo and the G|wi), as well as many others whose religious ideas are less well known. The locations of the groups mentioned are illustrated in Figure 1, and the classification of these Khoisan peoples by language and traditional economy (means of subsistence) is shown in Table 1.

God and Moon?

The most geographically isolated of all Khoisan groups are the ||xegwi or Batwa of the eastern Transvaal. They were described by their ethnographer as follows:

The living Batwa believe in the existence of a supreme being, |a'an. Their ideas about this being are very vague ... (Potgieter, 1955: 29).

The ethnographer, E. F. Potgieter, goes on to describe |a'an as the creator, as a being to whom the spirits of the dead go, and as one who is not prayed to but occasionally addressed with raised voice, as if speaking to a human. A lesser deity, |a'an 'e la tleni (|a'an the small) assists |a'an. Potgieter (1955: 29-30) also mentions information which, he claims, 'seems to point to a former more systematic worshipping of the moon': specifically, that the Moon is the giver of rain, and through rain, food; and that good fortune is described by the ||xegwi with the expression 'the moon is full', while suffering leads them to say 'the moon is small' (or 'dark'). Apart from one or two individuals, the ||xegwi, at the time of Potgieter's writing, did not attend the mission churches, claiming that their god was |a'an and not the Christian one.

This is about all Potgieter says on ||xegwi religious belief. It is hardly much of an account of a religious system. Nevertheless, his short, little-read monograph on this isolated people does confirm that the same elements of Khoisan religion—a high god, a lesser deity, the transmigration of the souls of the dead, and the importance of the Moon—are found far and wide across Khoisan southern Africa. In this context, it is well to bear in mind that the

Table 1.
The Classification of Khoisan groups mentioned in the text

Ethnic group	Traditional economy	Language	Ethnic family or classification group
xegwi (Batwa)	hunting and gathering	!Wi	Southern Bushmen
Xam	hunting and gathering	!Wi	Southern Bushmen
!xó (!ko)	hunting and gathering	ixó (Taa)	Southern Bushmen
!Kung	hunting and gathering	!Kung	Northern Bushmen
Nharo (Narou)	hunting and gathering	Khoe	Central Bushmen
G wi	hunting and gathering	Khoe	Central Bushmen
Damarara	herding, hunting, etc.	Khoe	Damarara (Bergdama)
Khoekhoe (including Nama)	herding, hunting, etc.	Khoe	Khoekhoe (Hollentots)

Khoisan peoples are linguistically as diverse as nearly any on the African continent: the ||xegwi language is genetically more distant from Nama than Yoruba is from Zulu, or English is from Hindi (see e.g. Westphal, 1971).

Of particular interest is Potgieter's attribution of moon-worship to the ||xegwi. Schapera (1930: 395) claimed that both Bushmen and Khoekhoe 'worship the Moon'. The Cape Khoekhoe in the 17th century were said to be moon-worshippers, apparently only because new moon and full moon were the times when they (as Marett might have put it) danced their prayers (see, e.g. Schapera, 1930: 374-76). There is no doubt that the Moon is important in Khoekhoe and Bushman symbolism, or that the lunar cycle marks propitious times for dancing, even today in the Kalahari, where dances are most often held at full moon; but moon-worship is largely a fantasy of European ethnographers.

Peter Kolb, perhaps the most perceptive of early Khoisan ethnographers, gives a slightly different version from others in his day (the early eighteenth century). Particularly revealing is Theophilus Hahn's (1881: 41) free translation from the original German edition of Kolb's account. This differs in some respects from Kolb's best-known English text on the subject (1968 [1731]: 90-111), but at least accurately reflects Hahn's own deep personal knowledge of Khoekhoe religion:

It is obvious that all Hottentots believe in a God. They know him and confess it; to him they ascribe the work of creation, and they maintain that he still rules over everything and that he gives life to everything. On the whole he is possessed of such high qualities that they could well describe him... Because the station of a chief is the highest charge, therefore they call the Lord *Gounia*, and they call the moon so, as their visible God. But if they mean the invisible, and intend to give him his true name, they call him *Gounia Tiquaa*, i.e., the God of all gods. (Peter Kolb, quoted in Hahn, 1881: 41; cf. Kolb 1968 [1731]: 96).

In fact, the Moon is not the Khoekhoe God himself; nor in this case is he regarded as a separate deity. He is the visible manifestation of God.

The failure of many Khoisan ethnographers to define the status of the Moon (or even point out the Moon's inherent existential ambiguity) probably stems from their failure either to see the structural position of the Moon in relation to other entities, or to explore the cosmo-semantic or syntactic context of indigenous statements about the Moon. Much the same goes for statements about God,

the minor deity, or deities generally, and is true of recent as well as older works.

Khoisan concepts of 'God'

The Khoisan people with whom I am most familiar are the Nharo of western Botswana. The concept 'God' is usually expressed in Nharo as *N!adiba* (which otherwise means 'sky'). Sometimes *N!adiba* is called *Hiiseba*, which is his unique, divine name, and sometimes *!xuba*, which like its Nama cognate *!khūb*, also means 'lord' or 'master' in a secular as well as a religious sense. And, as with, for example, the well-known Nuer concept *kwoth* (Evans-Pritchard, 1956), Nharo *n!adi-* has several related meanings and can be taken in the masculine singular or (more rarely) in other grammatical forms. Yet this aspect of Khoisan religion is still somewhat different from that of the Nuer. The Nharo language has formal number-gender suffixes, which in any given instance may or may not be semantically relevant.

A Nharo medicine man once told me that there are three classes of being: *N!adiba* or *Hiiseba* (God), *g||āūane* (the evil spirits or the spirits of the dead), and *khuene* (people). He then went on to talk about each in turn, beginning not with just a single male God, but with the male God and his wife *N!adisa*. The word *N!adisa* is, in fact, 'God' in the feminine singular, a form which would be grammatically incorrect if it were used in reference to 'the sky' in a secular sense. When the old man came to mention the fact that God the Sky is father of the Moon and the Sun, he began to use the word *N!adisara* (feminine dual) in place of *N!adisa* (feminine singular). God the Sky now had two wives, and one was Mother of the Moon (who among all Khoisan peoples is male and good), and the other, Mother of the Sun (who is female and bad, because she makes the earth too hot). The Moon and Sun are husband and wife. They mate beneath the earth, and their children are the moon and sun the next day. The moon also begets, this time apparently without sexual intercourse, a male child who is the moon at first crescent. Sometimes the moon at first crescent is described as the old moon reborn. Snails are also said to be 'children of the moon', and in Nharo the word for 'snail' is *n||ueba* (which means 'moon'), just as in Nama the word is *||khāxae* (which means, literally, 'moon-copulate'). The fact that these stems *n||ue* and

||khâ are etymologically unrelated, but in each language carry both of the two meanings, testifies to the near certainty that we are not dealing here merely with homonyms, although the possibility of recent diffusion is not at all precluded. An association of the Moon either with the High God (!khwa, 'the Rain', keeper of menstrual tabboos) or with the Mantis (|kaggen, the trickster figure) has long been argued for the |Xam on both etymological and mythological grounds (see, e.g., Schapera, 1930: 172-73; S. Schmidt, 1973; Hewitt, 1986: 40-41, 137-38; cf. Bleek and Lloyd, 1911). The relationship expressed in the Khoe examples (Nama and Nharo), however, is more subtle: snails, like the Moon, are said to have perpetual life, or to have the capability of death and rebirth.

At any rate, the point made by the Nharo medicine man is not that heavenly bodies have many offspring, or that he does not know how many gods there are; his point is that the components of the universe stand in systematic, and indeed, in some metaphorical sense, kinship relations to each other. In Nharo it is not possible to specify grammatical gender without also specifying grammatical number. In these examples, the fluidity of discursive meaning, which would be apparent to any Nharo-speaker, results partly from the linguistic necessity to employ grammatical number. Grammatical number, of course, also expresses meaning, and the medicine man was able to use grammatical number to convey some of his ideas on the nature of the universe. Such meaning is subtle, and comparable to the meaning sometimes conveyed by grammatical gender in Nharo and other Khoe languages. For example, *hiiba* (masc. sg.) means 'tree', while *hiisa* (fem. sg.) mean 'bush'; *tsane* (common gender plural, here denoting fluidity) means 'water', *tsasa* (fem. sg.) means 'pool' or 'pond', and *tsaba* (masc. sg.) means 'borehole' (see Barnard, 1985: 13-15, 82; Vossen, in press).

Grammatical number and gender are utilized according to conscious and logical rules, which tell us perhaps the Whorfian way in which a Nharo-speaker *thinks*, but not necessarily what he *believes*. To paraphrase Leach (1968) and at the same time invert the argument of Needham's *Belief, Language and Experience* (1972), belief is an 'inner state', to some extent independent of language. However, against Leach, I would argue that Nharo belief becomes at least more accessible, if not fully accessible, through recognition of the

parameters of Khoe linguistic structure. Implied in this definition of 'belief' is a notion of the intrinsic untranslatability, into either English or Nharo, of the experience of the Nharo universe which lies behind the structures, whether these structures be linguistic, mental, or, for that matter, metaphysical. Needham's (1972) provocative treatment of the polythetic nature of 'belief' in English highlights the complex relation between thought and language. Nevertheless, it leaves aside much that is implicit in the worldview of the Nharo medicine man, or the Nucr for whom God is not 'believed in' (in the modern, Western sense), because they take his existence for granted (Evans-Pritchard, 1956: 9; cf. Needham, 1972: 22-25).

Khoe languages—and these include Nharo and other Central Bushman ones as well as Khoekhoe dialects—are very different from Northern and Southern Bushman languages. So, what regulates !Kung, or Northern Bushman, belief? The !Kung are a people who speak a relatively isolating, only slightly inflective, non-agglutinative language, with word order much like English (and very much unlike the Khoe languages). It is also a language without the in-built morphological facility of the Khoe ones for abstract expression. In Khoe languages one can say, for example in Nama: *khoe* (person), *khoekhoe* (person of people, in other words 'Nama'), *khoesi* (friendly or human), *khoesis* (humanity, kindness, friendliness, or friendship), *khoea* (kind), *khoeaxis* (kindliness [more abstract than 'kindness']), *khoesigagus* (friendship, intimacy, or marriage), *khoeaxhoeb di* (my intimate friend), and so on (Hahn, 1881: 17; Kroenlein, 1889: 209-10). In !Kung, as far as I know, one cannot. Yet in !Kung, as in Nharo or Nama, the choice of a word may mean to the outsider more than is intended by the speaker. According to Lorna Marshall (1962: 223-25) the !Kung great god has eight names, and seven of these, including notably ||Gauwa, are also the names of the lesser god, his 'grandchild'. E. N. Wilmsen (personal communication) suggests that, rather as in Islam, if one could translate these 'names' they would signify *attributes* of God, intelligible to us partly through scientific, linguistic analysis, and partly through folk etymology. The former (linguistic analysis) may be of greater historical and therefore regional-comparative interest, but the latter (folk etymology) could be more revealing in the ways of thought of the !Kung today.

Gods, heroes and spirits

In general, Bushman religion emphasises the relation between deity and humanity, whereas Khoekhoe religion emphasises the relation between deity and deity. For all Khoisan peoples, though, God has one or more adversaries. These are almost always called by one of the related terms *g||āūa-* or *g||ama-* (with appropriate grammatical suffixes), no matter what the language. God and spirits either act independently or are merged as a single being or set of beings associated with the spirits of the dead, who in turn may be conceptually distinguished from the ancestors (the spirits being evil, and the ancestors good). Generally, the High God is the creator and, although for some peoples remote and not directly active in the world, has a presence in the world as well as in the sky. His goodness, or his moral ambiguity, varies with the degree to which the high-god concept assumes identity with other, more evil, elements of the spirit world.

For the !Kung, where God merges into evil spirit, he commits incest and cannibalism (Marshall, 1962: 229; cf. Lee, 1984: 106-07). For the G|wi, where his form is quite separate from that of the evil being, God is a vegetarian (Silberbauer, 1981: 52). The G|wi god N!adima, although remote, seems particularly to be responsible for the regulation of order in the universe, including the environment. N!adima and his wife N!adisa (which is the feminine form of his name) are by definition 'the sky'. They live above the earth in a sky with much water and vegetation, and are 'parents' of all humankind and of the animals, or at least the mammals, which live under N!adima's parental gaze on the earth (Silberbauer, 1981: 51-56). In slight contrast, the !xō creator-god Gu|e is said by some to have a wife and children, and by others, to be unmarried (Heinz, 1975: 22). He is complemented by a second, 'younger brother' force, |oa, who lives 'somewhere beyond the sky though lower than Gu|e' (1975: 22). As in other Khoisan religions, these !xō concepts are associated respectively with 'good' and 'evil', though the distinction between them 'is not always apparent or clear' (1975: 22).

Among the Khoekhoe, there is a more highly structured system of beliefs about the deities and the interrelation between them, though even here the deities merge into one another and it is sometimes difficult to tell, historically or across dialect boundaries,

whether we are speaking of the same or different beings. However, among the Nama of the 19th century we can clearly identify four beings, or at least four terms for beings, which stand in a clear, structural relation to each other: Tsûi-||Goab and ||Gâuab, and Haitsi-Aibib (Haiseb) and ≠Gama-≠Gorib (Schapera, 1930: 376-89; Carstens, 1975; S. Schmidt, 1975-76).

Tsûi-||Goab is the Nama creator, good and omnipresent, but not omnipotent. ||Gâuab is his rival. The etymology of the term 'Tsûi-||Goab' has been a matter of debate for over a century, and many theories have been put forward, especially by early Khoisan specialists (see, e.g., Schapera, 1930: 376-77). One of particular interest is the most prevalent theory at the turn of the century: that 'Tsûi-||Goab' originally meant 'sore knee' (Hahn, 1881: 61-62). For almost every philological theory there was a Nama myth, and in the myth to support this derivation, Tsûi-||Goab had fought repeatedly with ||Gâuab and repeatedly lost, yet nevertheless grew stronger with each bout. In the final battle, Tsûi-||Goab destroyed ||Gâuab with a blow behind the ear. Just before expiring, ||Gâuab gave Tsûi-||Goab a blow to the knee. The myth is also said to explain why Tsûi-||Goab walks with a limp.

The relation between Tsûi-||Goab and ||Gâuab is commensurate with the relation between the ancestor-hero Haitsi-Aibib and his adversary ≠Gama-≠Gorib. Haitsi-Aibib, like Tsûi-||Goab (and seemingly ||Gâuab, who is said to be still among us), died many times and was reborn (Hahn, 1881: 65-67; see also Hahn, 1878). Haitsi-Aibib quickly disposed of his rival. In mythical time, ≠Gama-≠Gorib would dig a hole, then tell any passer-by to throw a stone at his forehead. But ≠Gama-≠Gorib had a hard head and the stone would bounce back and kill the stone-thrower, who would then fall into the hole. When Haitsi-Aibib heard about the wicked ≠Gama-≠Gorib, he went to see him but declined the inevitable invitation to throw a stone at his forehead. Instead, he distracted ≠Gama-≠Gorib and hit him behind the ear. ≠Gama-≠Gorib died and fell into his own hole.

Haitsi-Aibib's death and rebirth is explained by another story, in which he eats poisonous berries and falls ill. He tells his son that, when he dies, he should be buried with soft stones over his grave. Haitsi-Aibib was duly buried, came to life again, and continued wandering the countryside. Piles of stones throughout Namibia and South Africa are said to be his graves, and Nama and Damara

travellers traditionally put a stone on such a grave for good luck when they pass by. **Haitsi-Aibib** is also credited with the ability to change himself into the form of many species of animal, and in Nama and Damara mythology this character sometimes replaces the Jackal, the Hare, and so on, who figure prominently as tricksters within **Xam**, **!Kung**, **Nharo**, and other Bushman mythology, as indeed they do in Nama mythology. Yet **Haitsi-Aibib** always uses his powers to do good. Like **Tsûi-||Goab** and like **||Khâb** (the Moon), **Haitsi-Aibib** comes from the east, which is the sacred direction among many Khoisan peoples. And like the Moon, he grows big and then small again. According to some, **Haitsi-Aibib's** mother and wife is the Sun, who is also said to be mother and wife to the Moon.

In fact, **Tsûi-||Goab**, **Haitsi-Aibib**, and perhaps the Moon too, are pretty much interchangeable in Khoekhoe mythology, as are **||Gâuab** and ***Gama-+Gorib** (cf. Hahn, 1881: 130-37; S. Schmidt, 1986b). The difference, as Peter Carstens (1975) has argued, is that the celestial god **Tsûi-||Goab** operates only in a collective sphere of influence. The Nama would pray to him, addressing him as **ao** (father), and priests of the various Nama tribes would sacrifice animals to him in collective worship at specific times of year, hoping but never being sure that he would favour his people. By contrast, the terrestrial ancestor figure **Haitsi-Aibib** operates in an individual sphere. Individual Nama would pile stones on his graves for good luck, and pray to him as their **||naub** (their grandfather or mother's brother).

So what of **||Gâuab**? **G||āua**, or with gender suffixes, **||Gâuab**, **G||āuaba**, **G||amama**, etc., is almost universally among Khoisan peoples a term for the evil god, the evil aspect of the good god, the evil spirits, or the spirits of the dead. Individual **Nharo** use the term for all these things, while apparently recognizing complete equivalence only between the last two: for most **Nharo**, evil spirits *are* the spirits of the dead. **Nharo**, unlike, e.g., **G|wi** (see Silberbauer, 1981: 112-14), recognize no other category of evil spirit. Some **Nharo** have no notion of a supreme **G||āuaba**, whereas others, like the **G|wi** to the east and the Nama to the west, have a quite definite notion of him as a unique being (cf. Guenther, 1986: 215-49). Among the **!Kung** (who seem to recognize **||Gauwa** either as the unique Evil Spirit or as part of or equivalent to the High God), the wind is also said to be **||gauwa**, perhaps as a

metaphor for misfortune, or possibly a vehicle on which the great Lesser Spirit travels. **||Gâuab** is also the Christian Nama word for 'Satan'. As Schapera (1930: 396) remarks, 'The beliefs regarding **||Gaua** ... are not crystallized into clear-cut conceptions, but are vague, inconsistent, and ambiguous'.

The Damara, however, seem to have had a different version of the spirit world (see Vedder, 1923, I: 97-142; 1928: 61-68). They speak the Nama language, and before their conversion to Christianity (in the nineteenth century) absorbed elements of both Khoekhoe and Herero religion. Yet the early 20th century missionary ethnographer Heinrich Vedder (1928: 61) claimed to have discovered isolated clans in the northwest of Namibia who still retained their early traditions. Curiously, these groups made no distinction between the good and the evil god, having only one term, **||Gamab** or **||Gâuab**, the term the Nama use for their evil god. It would be easy to say, as the Nama and the missionaries probably did, that the Damara had a **||Gâuab** cult or worshipped the Devil, or that the two Nama gods are, among the Damara, merged into one. Yet either statement, though in some sense true, would certainly be an oversimplification. The Damara **||Gâuab** is not the creator, for Vedder's Damara had no notion of creation. This **||Gâuab**, unlike the Nama gods **Tsûi-||Goab** and **||Gâuab**, frequently intercedes in individual human affairs, usually by causing death with his invisible arrows. But like these beings, and unlike Bushman **||gauwasi** or **g||āuane** (the **!Kung** and **Nharo** plural forms respectively), the Damara **||Gâuab** does not roam the earth. He shoots his arrows from *heaven* ('heaven' here being Vedder's translation for **||Gâuab's** village in the sky). Life in **||Gâuab's** heaven is much like life on earth, only the hunting is more successful and the foraging easier. All the Damara are said to travel there when they die, though the route is hazardous and the dead sometimes fall over the precipice along the way and lose their souls—not through **||Gâuab's** maliciousness, but through their own carelessness, for **||Gâuab** has no 'moral personality' (Vedder, 1928: 62). **||Gâuab's** village is laid out like a Damara one, with a shady tree and a holy fire in the middle. The elders there prize human flesh as a great delicacy; and sometimes, when **||Gâuab** will not help them obtain it, they send scorpions, snakes, thorns, and knives, to attack the living. On earth, sorcerers also try to enlist **||Gâuab's** support, in this case to stop the elders of heaven from succeeding; for their power too is a gift of **||Gâuab**.

The Damara conception of ||Gâuab, then, has elements in common with the ||xegwi god |a'an, and with the Nharo, G|wi and !Kung 'spirits' (also termed g||āua-, with appropriate suffixes), mentioned above. It also has much in common with the G|wi conception of G||amama, who casts down from the sky evil and invisible wooden arrows which lodge in women, from whom their evil diffuses through the bands, especially at times of seasonal aggregation (Silberbauer, 1981: 54). Among the Nharo, evil spirits (g||āuane) and alleged sorcerers shoot invisible grass arrows and perform other magic for ill or good. More obviously, the Damara ||Gâuab has parallels with the Nama deities, Tsûi-||Goab and ||Gâuab, and perhaps with the mythological character, ≠Gama-≠Gorib. The Damara concept of ||Gâuab suggests inversions and transformations of interrelated aspects of these belief systems which no doubt could be explicable either synchronically within a structuralist framework of equivalences and oppositions, or diachronically within a socio-economic determinist framework like the one Carstens (1975) has proposed specifically for the last hundred years or so of Nama history (cf. Barnard, 1988).

Mythology, scripture and conversion

As with Khoisan belief, a characteristic feature of Khoisan mythology is the tendency of ideas, in this case, myths or stories, to travel across linguistic, cultural, and environmental boundaries. One Nharo hua (a term which, as with similar terms in |Xam and !Kung, means both 'myth' and 'story') may illustrate the point. Very briefly, the story tells of a band of people who set out to build a hut so tall it would reach the sky. The Sky watched with interest as the hut grew taller and taller, but he eventually knocked it down, saying, 'You mustn't build a hut so high; you can't reach me'. I wrote that story down in 1974, early in my fieldwork. A year later I recorded the same story among a different group of Nharo some 100 kilometres away. The second version came during an evening of story-telling, about the Trickster Jackal, the Hare, the Moon, the Mantis, and so on; but this time, the site of the great hut was revealed as Cape Town. Only then did I recognize that the story referred to the Tower of Babel! Upon my questioning, the story-teller admitted that he had learned it from an itinerant white

preacher—a fact that seemingly had been quite irrelevant in the story-teller's decision to include it in the evening's performance.

Mythology undoubtedly does reveal systems of belief and explanation. However, a given myth may *become* just as much a part of one belief system as part of another. While I would not claim that the intended Judeo-Christian meaning of this myth was lost on the story-teller when he first heard it, I would nevertheless argue that the social and mythological context in which I heard the Bushman version was truly a Bushman one. It is characteristic of Bushman mythology, and of Bushman culture generally, that ideas can pass from one *group* to another, from one *system* to another, without any indigenous acknowledgement of the potential for transformation of such a system. Among the Bushmen, ideas (and stories) are easily assimilated without threat to the belief system as a whole.

For similar reasons, the notion of radical conversion through religious experience would seem to be largely inapplicable in Bushman society—though not in Khoekhoe society, where religion, like social structure, is less flexible and perhaps less adaptive, and where the events of the last three centuries have forced on individuals new, more rigid, forms both of social structure and of religious doctrine. It is difficult to isolate the reasons for these, but it seems to me that there were differences both between Bushman and Khoekhoe social structure and, to a lesser extent, between the style and political context of missionization among the two groups, which account for the greater fluidity of Bushman religious ideas (see, e.g., Vedder, 1938 [1936]: 220-22, 467-69). Missionization among most Bushman groups has been altogether more low-key. Only a small fraction of Bushmen have in any sense been *converted* to Christianity, and I doubt whether many of these, except perhaps at one or two permanent mission settlements in northeastern Namibia, have displayed even the pretence of giving up their traditional beliefs. Bushman belief, as studies by Silberbauer (1981) and Bieseke (1978) have shown, hinges on a kind of eco-socio-theology in which the natural, the social and the spiritual are manifest in a single indigenously-defined 'ecosystem'. Flexibility in group structure and social relations generally are coupled with equal flexibility on the plane of belief and explanation.

A more extreme view of flexibility as the cornerstone of Bushman religion comes from Mathias Guenther. In his masterly article 'Bushman religion and the (non)sense of anthropological theory of

religion', Guenther (1979) dismisses functionalist and structuralist approaches in favour of what he terms 'religion as anti-structure', and argues that Bushman religion in particular, and religion in general, is characterized by disorderliness, idiosyncrasy, and a lack of functionality. I find much of Guenther's argument highly convincing, and his descriptions of Bushman religious beliefs and practices largely consistent with my own observations. However, I think he underestimates the structural uniformity of Khoisan religions when taken collectively and not, as he does, one-by-one. It is not that fluidity *denies* structure, as Guenther contends. Rather, fluidity in religious belief functions as an indigenous creative and explanatory device and as a product of linguistic and social circumstances, both within and beyond broadly-defined structural frameworks. Like the social fluidity in patterns of settlement and seasonal migration, fluidity in belief supplements such frameworks and allows them to persist, as they have done for centuries, possibly millennia, from one end of the subcontinent to the other.

Of course, the notion of fluidity need not be confined to changes in religious ideas within the Khoisan culture area; it is equally applicable to borrowed ideas and to 'conversion', in Robin Horton's (1971; 1975) sense. In contrast particularly to the Islamist Humphrey Fischer (1973), Horton argues that 'conversion' in Africa involves not so much a rejection of traditional beliefs, but a growing acceptance of a more all-encompassing explanatory structure generally implicit in African religions (cf. Wilson, 1971; Kuper, 1987: 150-66). Horton differentiates two forms of African religion. First, there are those religions which are derived from a *microscopic* view. This emphasises the relation between people and their immediate environment and gives prominence to the lesser spirits. Such religious views are characteristic of small-scale cultivators in various parts of the continent. Secondly, there are those religions which give greater prominence to the *macrocosm*, involving a Supreme Being. This emphasis, Horton argues, is found among peoples most exposed to wider communication, e.g., through long-distance trade. It is also found among pastoralists and hunter-gatherers, and Horton attributes the importance of a Supreme Being among such peoples to their transhumance (e.g., in the case of Nuer and Dinka pastoralists) or flexible group structure (in the case of Pygmy and Bushman hunter-gatherers). In Horton's terms, both the Khoekhoe and the Bushmen have achieved forms

of socio-territorial organization and a consequent macrocosmic world view which are amenable to the development of indigenous High God concepts. The difference between these peoples is that most Khoekhoe have been relatively sedentary for nearly a century, whereas even 'settled' Bushmen still retain great flexibility in group structure and lack political or other social constraints, just as when they were full-time hunter-gatherers.

Theophilus Hahn (1881: 150-51) once commented on what he regarded as the excessive dogmatism of missionaries among the Nama. His argument for the use of Khoekhoe rather than Hebrew or Greek terms in Bible translation occurs in his book *Tsun-!-goam* amidst a proto-structuralist defence of Max-Müller's theory of the 'psychical identity of mankind'. At the time, Calvinists and Lutherans were competing with each other to gain converts, by appeal to theological arguments which were unintelligible within the Nama system of belief. Hahn was always a man of controversy; he was also the son of a missionary and grew up with Nama, as well as German, virtually as a mother tongue. Of his many battles with the Judeo-Christian concept 'God' as *Elob* or *Eloha* (from the Hebrew *Eloah* or *Elohim*), rather than *Tsü-!-Goab*, which, he argued, was the Nama equivalent. To this day, the Bible is known in Nama as *Elob Mits* (or *Elobmits*)—'The Word of God'. In *Elob Mits* (1966), the borrowed term *Elob* alternates with the indigenous term *Khub* (Lord). In fact, the Judaeo-Christian God is never addressed or referred to now or within the last century as *Tsü-!-Goab* (at least not in print), even though this was the appellation given in the catechism and translation of the Gospels by J. H. Schmelten (1831), probably the first foreign missionary to preach in the Nama language. Kroeber's Nama dictionary (1889: 65) lists no fewer than eight derivative expressions from *Elob* (excluding purely grammatical variants), for example, *elosi* (divine), *elo-!-ao-!gaxa* (God-fearing) and *eloxoresa* (ungodliness, sin).³

The interaction between Khoisan and Western religious ideas is a fascinating area for historical research and an area which might in itself yield much insight into pre-Christian Khoisan religion. Early white settlers in the northern Cape, pious but geographically ignorant, believed that the graves of *Haitsi-Aibib* were monuments left by the Children of Israel on their way to Canaan (Hahn, 1881: 47). Educated ethnographers have alluded, metaphorically at

least, to modern Khoekhoe as descendants of the 'lost tribes' (Maingard, 1931);⁴ and indeed the 'Hamitic theory' of the origin of the Khoekhoe language was the subject of the Ph.D. thesis of the foremost Khoisanist of the nineteenth century, W. H. I. Bleek (1851). Others have simply drawn upon the obvious parallels between Old Testament and Khoisan beliefs in their interpretations of the latter. Even New Testament parallels are not unknown. As one missionary claimed, in a plea for converting those regarded by many, perhaps, as the ultimate heathens: 'John the Baptist was a Bushman' (Philip, 1828, I: 13). Equally, parallels between *Haitsi-Aibib* and Christ do not go unnoticed by Khoekhoe Christians, though these two persons are not, to my knowledge, regarded as aspects of the same being (nor, apparently, is *Haitsi-Aibib* explicitly equated with *Tsûi-||Goab* in a homoousian or homoiousian sense, though the potential is obvious). Neither have Khoisan rituals always been thought of as incompatible with Christianity. A Dutch Reformed dominee, now retired from the ministry, once told me he was considering incorporation of the medicine dance (see e.g., Marshall, 1969; Barnard, 1979) into the local liturgy of his mission church. On the Khoisan side, informants have for over a century given anthropologists myths of origin which tell not only of red (Khoisan) and black peoples, but of whites as well, and their place in the world of *N!adiba*'s or *Tsûi-||Goab*'s creation.

Conclusion

To sum up, both structure and fluidity are discernible in given Khoisan religions, but their greater significance emerges through recognition of a regional system of systems in interplay with itself and with European (and perhaps Bantu) religious ideas, as well as with other systematic elements of Khoisan society—economics, politics, kinship, and the like. Variation in beliefs and belief structures are prevalent (1) within the culture area as a whole, (2) within given Khoisan societies both through time and in the present, and (3) within the idiosyncratic belief systems of individual people. Such variations, whether the product of structural transformation or of moral or cognitive ambiguity, are best understood within a regional approach which includes both structural and interpretive methods. While vast quantities of writings exist on specific Khoisan religions, when we put them all together anthropologists still have a lot of explaining to do.

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2. In this paper (as in Schapera, 1930), the personified or spiritually manifest entities, Moon, Sky, etc., are written with an initial capital, while their 'natural' or secular equivalents are given in lower case letters. For reasons which should become clear, I believe this distinction is inherent in Khoisan thought, though obviously not represented in any indigenous writing system. Indigenous terms, including proper nouns, are given according to traditional or current practice in ethnographic writing. Where appropriate, the new (post-1970) Nama orthography is used, though traditional word divisions are retained in proper nouns (indicated with hyphens), and exact quotations are kept in their original form.

3. In contrast, concepts such as 'Almighty' (*Hoa|gaixab*), 'Comforter' (*||Khae +gao-oab*), 'Redeemer' (*Ore-aob*) and 'Holy Spirit' (*!Anu Gagab*) are all rendered today by loan-translations with fully indigenous Nama morphemes (*Nama/Damara Orthography* No. 2, 1977: 95).

4. Maingard's allusion in that particular paper is entirely metaphorical, but is premised upon the wide acceptance of the 'Hamitic theory'.

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THE BLACK AND THE WHITE: THE USE OF DUALITIES IN ETULO HISTORICAL THOUGHT*

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Dualities, agency and the Etulo

In exploring the oral tradition of the Etulo of central Nigeria, it soon becomes apparent that their reconstructions of the past are organised at least in part by dualistic principles of categorisation. On the surface, this mirrors a cleavage in Etulo between two different types of sacral authority. To simplify a multifaceted system, Etulo government since the 18th century has mainly revolved around two sources of power, a sacral king known as the Otse-Etulo and an elaborate network of title-holders, the Ato-Otse. In any oral rendition dealing with their past, the Etulo place the Otse-Etulo within a diachronic perspective, but relegate the Ato-Otse by comparison to a near-synchronic limbo. Most elders with an interest in history can name many, if not all, of the fourteen Otse-Etulo on the 'official' king list, whereas only a few can go back further than three generations in enumerating past Ato-Otse title-holders. Not surprisingly, Etulo oral culture is replete with many types of evidence concerning the origins and growth of their sacral kingship.¹ However, it is nearly silent on the subject of the Ato-Otse other than to attribute an origin of most of the titles to Kwararrafa,² a famous central Nigerian polity that has long existed in various forms to the east of Etulo in the middle Benue river valley. Today, Kwararrafa is most closely associated with the Wapan Jukun Kingdom of Wukari, 100 kilometres to the east of Etulo.

