

**Guenther, Mathias G.: Bushman Folktales. Oral Traditions of the Nharo of Botswana and the /Xam of the Cape. (Studien zur Kulturkunde, 93.) Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1989. 166 pp.**

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Far from being a side-line in an anthropologist's fieldwork schedule, folktales can unlock "the heart of cultural adaptation" (Bieseke et al. 1986:164). This book provides some of the keys. The recording of Bushman folklore by Europeans began only a little more than a century ago, despite the fact that European settlers had come in contact with Bushmen since the early eighteenth century. The delay had as much to do with the unfriendly atmosphere between them as with the short supply of scholars interested and willing to learn the Bushman language, to understand what the Bushmen had to say and then to write it down. It has taken many decades for a sufficiently large body of folktales to be recorded so that generalizations can be made about the position of mythology in the Bushman worldview. However hard one tries to create context with the written word from that is an essentially ephemeral experience, folktales lose their spellbinding quality and much of their meaning when placed in a different medium for a different audience in a different time and place. It is a little bit like reading the text of a foreign movie without seeing the pictures and one needs a well-informed guide to lead one through the mist. Mathias Guenther, author and editor of this collection of stories from informants from two Bushman groups, the Nharo and the /Xam, who spoke different languages and lived about 1,000 kms and 100 years apart, is such a guide, despite the fact that the tales were recorded under quite different circumstances.

Most of the 80 Nharo narratives were collected by Guenther in the Ghanzi District of Botswana from 1968 to 1970. There were 14 informants, all men and all but one Nharo-speakers, but Ghanzi is an ethnic melting pot (p. 30) and current Nharo oral traditions are the result of many years of contact with other groups. Since 1970 Guenther has published more than a dozen papers that have focused primarily on social and religious changes that took place as the Nharo continued to shift the emphasis of their economy from hunting and gathering to farm and village labour. In moving away from the ecological and technological focus common in the work of other anthropologists, his is some of the earliest work on Bushmen living on farms and in villages rather than in the more remote countryside. Many of the Nharo texts in *Bushman Folktales* mirror this, neatly illustrating the adaptability of the people and their mythology.

The sixteen /Xam texts, on the other hand, were written down between 1870 and 1878 by W.H.I. Bleek and Lucy Lloyd during interviews with /Xam from the north-central Cape who had been in prison in Cape Town but were then living at the Bleek home. They were interviewed on a daily basis over periods of several years in some cases and their testimony was taken down by hand verbatim in /Xam and later translated into English, sometimes with the assistance of the narrators, but often many years later. Only two of the sixteen narratives presented here have been previously published and in fact the majority of the more than 100 recorded by Bleek and Lloyd are still available only in manuscript form. They, too, reflect changing times for the informants who were also being drawn into labour on European farms, and they also have a strong male bias as only one of the six informants was a woman. The translation by Bleek and Lloyd from the verbatim /Xam narratives "is occasionally antiquated and Victorian in its ring and it somewhat grates on the ear of the modern reader" (p. 25), but it was a relief to see that Guenther resisted the temptation to edit and has stuck to the Bleek and Lloyd translations, only substituting 'you' for 'thee' and 'your' for 'thine' and changing word order in some instances. Had he made the mistake of making the translations more 'readable', someone in years to come would surely have been as critical of his work as he is of the "fairly loose translations" by Dorothea Bleek (p. 27).

The book is divided into two sections: the first is an introduction describing the context and analysing the content of the folktales. The approach is that of a social anthropologist rather than of a structuralist anthropologist, folklorist or historian and the focus is therefore primarily on human relationships. Levi-Strauss does not feature in the references and nor do Turner or Dundes. Apart from Hewitt's (1986) book, there is no other similarly detailed analysis of the /Xam material although it has, of course, been used extensively in the interpretation of rock art (for example, Lewis-Williams 1981).

Guenther's writing highlights the changing discourse of Western anthropologists over the past sixty years as much as the changing fortunes of the Nharo and others. For example, Bleek's (1928:44) statement that few Nharo with their characteristic "child nature" will "be given the chance to survive and settle down as workmen. The change comes too rapidly to let them develop; when the man who works arrives, the hunter and food gatherer is doomed" appears patronizing when contrasted with Guenther's account of his informant !Khuma//ka who expressed "raw resentment and bitterness about the settlers in what was once Bushman land ... [where] the Bushmen ... have sunk ever more deeply into destitution, and they have to suffer getting bullied and abused" (p. 24). It contrasts, too, with the view of Vierich (quoted in Solway & Lee 1990:121) that "'interdependence' more accurately describes the relationship between San and non-San and that San simply 'play the beggar' to get handouts."

The question of 'Who's the Boss?' in this contact situation is of course the central issue in the current debate with the so-called 'Kalahari revisionists' (Solway & Lee 1990) and the book under review is therefore of singular interest because of the insight it can give on the opinions of Bushmen themselves. While he is sympathetic to the revisionists' viewpoint (Guenther 1990:127) and devotes the last chapter in the book to legends that deal with the interaction between Bushmen and Bantu-speakers, he emphasizes that there are degrees of interdependence. This is reflected in folktales in which biblical characters play key roles in Nharo creation myths on the one hand, and in tales where non-Bushman people do not feature at all on the other.

Myth can inform about social structure and to this end Guenther

discusses how the folktales deal with the mediation of difficult social situations and the consequent encoding of customs. Tension was most often created amongst both the Nharo and /Xam by disagreement between spouses and in-laws, unseemly behaviour towards kin, accusations of laziness, the failure to share generously and correctly and, finally, problems resulting from the contact between Bushmen and settler groups (Khoikhoi, Bantu-speakers and Europeans). It is these themes that are often uppermost in the Bushman narratives.

Section II takes up about two thirds of the volume and presents the folktales in four groups: Creation, Primal Time, Trickster and Legends. Each group is in turn divided into Nharo and /Xam narratives with notes on the circumstances in which they were collected and summaries of the plots and the genre. The typology is not much more than a "heuristic ordering device" (p. 37), the chapter titles reflecting "the nodal points on the mythological map of the Bushmen" that help to focus the concepts and symbols central to the mythology.

The manner in which the narratives were presented and the relationship between collector and informant is almost as important as their content. Although he admits that for him the Nharo folktales were an incidental field task and, were he to have the opportunity of doing it again, he would do it differently, he has done a creditable job. There are notes on the context of the story and the beginning of each one, although this kind of detail is often missing from the /Xam texts. In his version of the story of *How Men Got Women* (pp. 61-63), for example, !Khuma//ka made sure no women could hear what he said and made Guenther promise not to tell the story to any of the women at /Oaxa (let's hope none of them gets a copy of the book). Having been told in all-male company, the Nharo narratives are much more 'spicy' and often include sexual innuendoes and violence that are missing (or were not recorded?) in the Bleek and Lloyd manuscripts. On the other hand, although the context in which /Xam tales were told may not always be clear, their narrative style is much more expansive than that of the Nharo and the contributions are generally longer and more detailed.

The chapter on Creation myths and folktales is the longest of the four in Section II. It includes accounts of the creation not only of people

and animals, but also of the sun, the moon, death, women, sexual intercourse and marriage, and fire. However, there is only one short fragment that refers to what Guenther calls the "basic charter myth" (p. 42), the first of two stages in a 'double creation' in which animals were first people but, because God saw they had no customs, they were recreated as animals. It is the second stage when the old order was reversed and animals were told who they could marry and what they were to eat that receives a great deal more attention, particularly in the /Xam tales of the Anteater's laws.

The way in which teachings from the Bible have been woven into the Nharo myths is particularly intriguing. They are used in contexts that missionaries would not have dreamed of. In one version, Addam collapses into a trance state when God removes his rib to make Effa (p. 44) and in another, Jessu Kriste fetches healing arrows from the anthill houses of Addam and Effa and brings them to the doctors when they dance for them (p. 46). It is as if the Nharo narrators had been persuaded through contact with Christians that Adam and Eve and Jesus Christ were powerful figures so they incorporated them into the myths to enhance their credibility. There is seldom any hint that the fundamental principles of Christianity (faith, hope, charity, love, forgiveness) have been transferred which demonstrates the resilience and flexibility of the core of Bushman cosmological and mythological premises.

The social position of the Bushmen in relation to others (particularly Europeans and Bantu-speakers in the Nharo case) is also dealt with at length in the Creation chapter and Guenther remarks again and again on the feeling of inferiority amongst the Bushmen and their perception of themselves as naive, ineffectual, weak, foolish and rather pathetic (p. 69). The story of the Tower of Babel finds a comfortable niche in their folktales to explain the dilemma in which they find themselves.

The narratives included in the chapter on Primal Time are those that deal with the 'early race', the Bushmen who were animals (but sometimes human or humanoid) and "had no customs", particularly in relation to the greed for food (even resulting in self cannibalism), marriage problems and tension amongst in-laws, and disregarding taboos (particularly menstrual) (p. 87). They dramatise the opposite of the moral order of the narrator

and his listeners to show what should not be done rather than what should.

One of the underlying themes in the Primal Time narratives is that of the status of women as embodied in the myths in which a wife or mistress is killed and eaten as meat. Instead of seeing this as an expression of gender antagonism, Guenther suggests the opposite: namely that it enhances the status of women in terms of their economic role as providers. "The challenge of male hunting to her economic importance as gatherer is defused by symbolically transforming woman into meat... It is a cultural mechanism that helps to sustain gender equality, one of the hallmarks of Bushman social organization" (pp. 86-87). While this possibility is relatively easy to see in stories like the Elephant Woman, Big and Small ~~eye~~ Bird in which the child kills the mother and eats the meat (pp. 88-90), there are more sinister overtones in Heiseb and his Gemsbok Wife (pp. 94-95), in which the man's mother and wife kill his mistress and serve him the meat, and in the strange /Xam tale of The !Khau Lizard who Brought Home his Own Flesh (pp. 102-104) in which the husband cuts meat from his own body to bring home to his wife and child. In explaining the latter Guenther suggests that here the man is the victim as a "countervailing measure against the mythological victimization of women and wives", again promoting gender equality (p. 101).

The Trickster narratives are the most entertaining and reflect the ambiguity of this complex character who takes on many different guises from /Kaggen-Mantis to Eyes-on-his-Feet, to Jackal, //Gauwa and Pate. Also included are six stories featuring the Hare as trickster that is more characteristic of the mythology of Bantu-speakers than Khoisan. The trickster may be good or bad, clever or stupid, is sexually ambiguous and may bring either health and good fortune or sickness and disaster. The narratives included here present an interesting range of his many-faceted personalities.

Amongst the Ghanzi farm Bushmen, Jackal is the more popular trickster who frequently outwits the Boer 'Baas', as for example in the very amusing tale of Jackal and Porcupine Digging a Well that is told in three versions (pp. 130-133). Jackal takes the credit for the work that Porcupine does in digging a well for the farmer who inevitably discovers his duplicity.



Jackal clearly regards the fun of deceit as more than worth the beating he receives. The /Xam tales about Jackal also show his cunning, but he is lauded for his courage and wisdom too.

Fianlly, there are the narratives grouped under the heading of Legends that deal with people and are set in real and fairly recent times. These are the only ones that do not have animal heroes and instead they often deal with traumatic social situations, such as raids and the aftermath of a murder, primarily involving Bantu-speakers. The /Xam story included here (How "Chaser-of-Food" made the Game Animals Wild) does not fit in well and could have been replaced by one of /Han/kass'o's narratives about Korana raids recorded by Lloyd.

In more general vein, the title and subtitle of the book emphasise Guenther's belief that the mythologies of the Nharo and /Xam are essentially similar. He takes this point further with the statement made sixty years ago by Schapera (1930:399) that there was "one religious system common to all Bushmen and Hottentots" (Khoikhoi). They are part of a "Khoisan tradition' with respect to the religious, cosmological and expressive domain" (p. 13). It is worth asking whether this view is justified.

Drawing on Sigrid Schmidt's work and his own, Guenther believes the similarity between Bushman and Khoikhoi mythology lies primarily in the divinity //Gauwa who, with different spellings and different emphases with regard to his nature and function, is found in the religions of all Bushman and Khoikhoi groups as a trickster figure. In addition there are the common themes of two orders of creation and the reversal of transformation of the first into the second; a mythological universe inhabited by therianthropic creatures who shift from one life form to the other and whose existence is complicated by the three major problems of food greed, marital instability and in-law tension; and the sharing of two central myths, namely the story of the Moon and the Hare that tells of the origin of death, and the theft of fire from a being (usually Ostrich) who carried fire under its armpit (p. 34).

The differences between the mythologies of the Bushmen and the Khoikhoi (Nama and Dama), on the other hand, are identified in narrative style, the relative incidence of certain narrative types, and details of incidents in particular tales (p. 35).

Other authors, however, have seen more important contrasts within the Khoisan mythologies. Hewitt (1986:40), writing in 1976, saw a fundamental difference between /Xam mythology and that of the central and northern San because the former did not have a deity resembling /Gaua [sic] but believed in /Kaggen and !Khwa. Schapera (1930:398), too, thought that the /Xam stood apart from the rest because they believed in /Kaggen-Mantis, because they had a relatively more complex mythology, and because //Gauwa among the Khoikhoi was seen as an evil-doer. Guenther's reason for arguing for a basic unity (p. 36) is that he sees both //Gauwa and /Kaggen as trickster figures, as is the Khoikhoi Heitsi-Eibib, and because he believes more recent work (including his own published in this volume) has shown the mythology of the !Kung and Nharo to be as complex as that of the /Xam. While one could say that introducing a new corpus of folktales inevitably moves the goal posts and creates a different body of information that may throw more light on whether the 'evil-doer' (also referred to as Satan on occasion) can be equated with the trickster, we still have to ask how many similarities do we have to find to make the San and Khoikhoi mythologies 'the same'.

A point in favour of a pan-Khoisan mythological tradition that is worth considering is that such an overall unity would certainly be expected if we supported Westphal (1963) and Elphick's (1977, 1985) thesis on the origin of the Khoikhoi. This suggests on linguistic grounds that all the Khoikhoi are descended from Tshu-Khwe-speaking Bushmen of Botswana who shifted from foraging to herding more than 2000 years ago and moved gradually southwards to the southern Cape coast with their cattle and sheep acculturating /Xam and other foragers en route. What we would be seeing in the mythology, then, is the result of up to 2000 years' change that would inevitably echo diversity in social structure and economy, but would nevertheless maintain the elements of a common cosmology. I believe that this is what the similarities singled out by Guenther reflect. If one were looking for 'signs' one could cite the narrative given by !Khuma//ka to Guenther (p. 66) in which he says that he had heard from the old people that the Bushmen were the first people ever to have cattle, but it would be overly simplistic and naive to assume that it refers to the original historic event.



Whether or not it is useful heuristically to put the Khoikhoi and Bushman mythologies into one basket or into two depends ultimately on the questions we want to answer. If we wish to know whether the Khoikhoi were descended from Bushman foragers, then it is indeed useful to find common features that will show basic similarities in their beliefs. If we wish to explore the relationship between myth and social structure, on the other hand, it may be more relevant to analyse differences in the narratives of herders and foragers that focus on kinship, inheritance and other issues which separate the two economic groups, a task certainly beyond the scope of this particular book.

In conclusion and without wishing to detract from the many positive aspects of Guenther's work, there are two small points with which I would take issue. The first is the statement that the Bleek informants were the last generation of /Xam and that "Today none are left" (p. 19). It is true that no one speaks /Xam or exists by foraging any longer, but the descendants of the informants are still living in the north-central Cape and still carry the European surnames given to their forefathers. I met a man at Katkop in 1985 who claimed to speak a few words of /Xam (translation: "Here come the Boere, we must run away"), a local farmer knew a family with the surname of Hoesar (Dia!kwain was Dawid Hoesar), and a third man told how his /Xam father had been captured as a child by the Boers who 'tamed' him. No-one that I spoke to, though, could remember any folktales so it may be true to say that the Khoisan narrative tradition is extinct.

The second aspect that bothered me was the poor standard of proof reading with up to five or six mistakes per page. One can cope with straight typographic errors such as 'haand' for 'hand' and 'und' for 'and' or even 'Ngamila and' for 'Ngamiland', but it is unacceptable to have /Han-kass'o's name spelt every which way but right, annoying to find references in the text that are not listed in the bibliography (e.g. Schapera 1930) or are incorrect and indecipherable (e.g. Bleek 1987:7 cited on p. 72), and puzzling when words are left out altogether (e.g. the first line on p. 75 should surely read "they would not live again...").

In summary, this is a particularly fine collection of primary source material with interesting and original ideas and analyses of a much-

neglected subject. The book is inexpensively produced and within the reach of most individuals and libraries. It is essential reading for every scholar of Bushman folklore and mythology.

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