

Human-Animal Relationships in San and
Hunter-Gatherer Cosmology, Volume II

Mathias Guenther

Human-Animal
Relationships in San
and Hunter-Gatherer
Cosmology, Volume II

Imagining and Experiencing Ontological Mutability

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For Stephan and Daniel

The original version of this book was revised. This book was inadvertently published with few errors which has been corrected now. An erratum to this book can be found at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-21186-8_8.

PREFACE

This book is written to fill two gaps in anthropology, in two of the discipline's research fields, the one in hunter-gatherer studies, specifically its subfield of Bushman studies, the other in the more recent field of what some refer to as “the anthropology of ontology” (Scott 2013) and others have dubbed the “New Animism” (Harvey 2006: xi)—as opposed to its “Old”, evolutionary rather than relational, predecessor, *pace* Tylor. These two fields at present exclude each other, in terms of ethnographic substance and theoretical discourse, to the detriment of both. This book sets out to bring the relational ontology paradigm to San studies, and vice versa, to the respective research field's benefit.

This goal is all the more apposite in that hunter-gatherer studies and relational ontology have been linked from the start, back in the 1990s. This is when the “ontological turn”—which has since then been taken in socio-cultural anthropology generally (and is part of an even wider—post-humanist—turn across Western thinking generally)—was first taken in Amazonian studies, among such hunting people as the Achuar, Araweté and Avila Runa, by Philippe Descola, Eduardo Vivieros de Castro and Eduardo Kohn, the three leading voices in Amazonian studies (Costa and Fausto 2010). Through the influence of another leading voice, Tim Ingold, studies of relational ontology were undertaken at around the same time in the Subarctic, from northern Scandinavia, through Siberia (Brightman et al. 2012; Halbmayer 2012) to North America, where ethnologists such as Adrian Tanner, Harvey Feit, Robin Ridington, Colin Scott and Robert Brightman had worked on relational and cosmological aspects of hunter-prey relations even before the 1990s. The influence is

evident in these ethnographies of another Subarctic researchers, Irven Hallowell, who a generation before, in an essay on Ojibwa ontology that has since become a foundational article in relational ontology, conceptualized the “non-human person” (or “other-than-human person”), thereby widening the field of social relations—and the concept of both society and culture—beyond humankind (1960). A similar recasting of “animism as relational epistemology”, which acknowledged Hallowell’s influence (Bird-David 1999: S71), was the theme, 20 years ago of a then seminal and now classic *Current Anthropology* article by Nurit Bird-David, which situated relational ontology among a number of hunter-gatherer-horticulturalists in southern Asia.

Yet, the ontological turn, for all of its paradigm-shifting effects on the study of hunter-gatherers during the last and first decades of the previous and present centuries, all but by-passed the Kalahari, among whose hunting-gathering people ethnographers were wont to examine the human-animal relationship not in social, cosmological, mystical fashion but instrumentally and strategically, as a meat-on-the-hoof resource, cherished—more so than plant—for its high caloric yield and thus a key concern of the “foraging mode of production” and its *modus operandi*, “optimal foraging strategy”. This cultural-ecological, theoretical-materialist bent in San studies was especially marked and engrained in San studies, with the San, ever since the path-breaking “Man the Hunter” conference in 1966 and as a result of a large number of high-quality ethnographic writings on the San. The effect of all of this was to render this foraging group one of the two (alongside the Aché) textbook cases of the optimal forager, whose “immediate-return” subsistence economy afforded people “affluent” lifeways. When Amazonian and Subarctic hunting became considered in social-relational and cosmological terms rather than instrumental-alimentary ones, in the 1990s, the materialist paradigm continued to inform research in San studies (albeit, not exclusively so, especially through the “Revisionism Debate” this field generated, in terms of political economy and World Systems theory, both paradigms the discursive links of which to relational ontology are no closer than they are to optimal foraging).¹

I set out in this book to show that San world view and lifeways are in fact also pervaded—at the ontological level, the way people conceive of, perceive and experience their interaction with animals, along with other beings of their (preter)natural world—with relationality and intersubjectivity (and have done so in the past, on the basis of ethnohistorical and

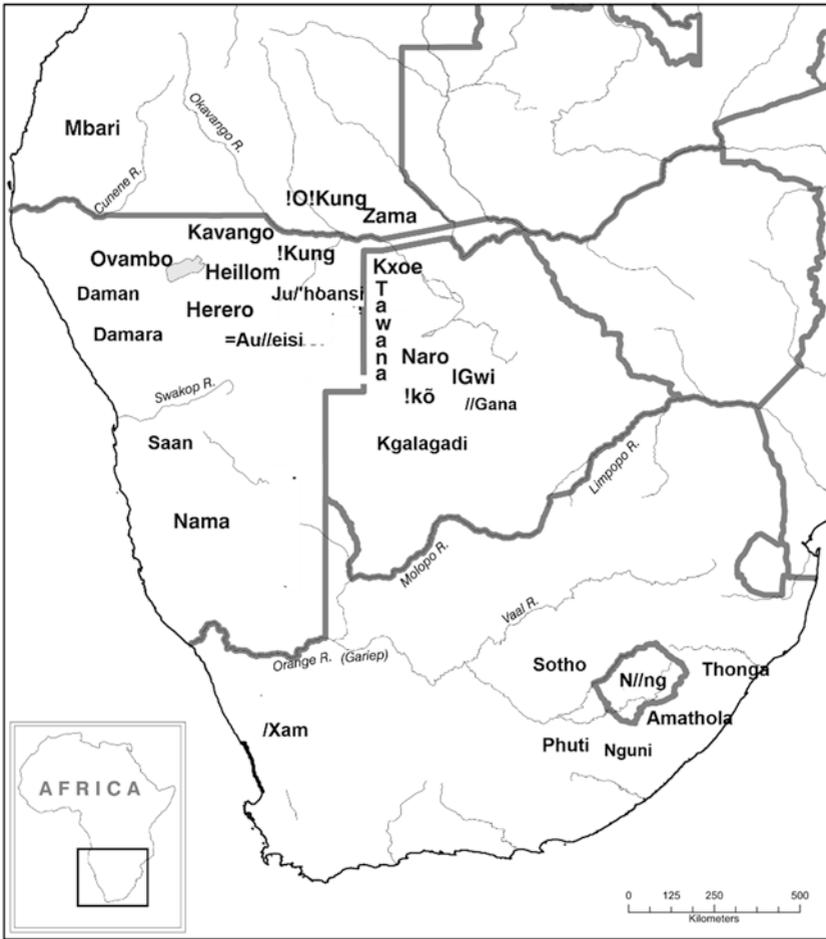
¹For elaboration on these points see Guenther (2015: 281–82, 302–9; 2017: 3–4).

archaeological evidence largely on southern San that will be marshaled). In filling this gap in our understanding of San ethnography and culture I will also fill the gap in ontological anthropology, which has excluded these southern hunting people from its neo-animistic purview. Apart from adding new insights to the relational ontology perspective in anthropology, this study, of San-ism, also underscores the important insight that animism is not some monolithic schema or cosmologico-religious complex but something diverse and multiplex, structurally varied, ecologically and historically contingent. Indeed, as I will also argue, one such included in many and varied animisms of people and cultures of this world are those from the West.

I have recently dealt with these issues in two exploratory articles on relational ontology in the context of San cosmology and lifeways, namely “‘Therefore Their Parts Resemble Humans, for They Feel That They Are People’: Ontological Flux in San Myth, Cosmology and Belief” (in *Hunter-Gatherer Research* 2015) and “‘The Eyes Are No Longer Wild: You Have Taken the Kudu into Your Mind’: The Supererogatory Aspects of San Hunting” (in *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 2017). These articles gave me the impetus, with some encouragement from colleagues and friends, for this book. It adds to, as well as expands and complements, what is presented, more or less provisionally, in these two articles.

The ethnographic base of this book consists of both my own field work and of ethnographies by other Kalahari anthropologists, as well as of ethnohistorical sources, both published and archival. Given the quantity and variety of this entire source material, most of the contemporary and historical San linguistic groupings of southern Africa are referenced in this book. (See Map 1 for their distribution over southern Africa, and of some of their Khoe- and Bantu-speaking neighbors.)

Most of the archival source consists of unpublished /Xam texts from the Bleek/Lloyd archive. They are referred to by the notational system used by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd that differentiated between interlocutors, informants (by the first, Roman numeral), and by the notebook number and its page number(s), e.g. L VIII. – 4, p. 6365 rev. (Lloyd, /Han#kasso, notebook 4, page number 6365, back of page). These archival text references can be readily looked up in University of Cape Town’s open-access digitalized Bleek/Lloyd archive (“Digital Bleek and Lloyd”, lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.za). The identifying Roman numerals for the other two key narrators are II for //Kabbo, V for Diä!kwain; for the two main !Kung informants, !Nanni and Tamme the identifying numerals are XI and XII. For more information on the /Xam informants see Bleek and Lloyd (1911: vi–xvii), Deacon and Dowson (1996: 11–43), Guenther



Map 1 Distribution of Khoisan- and Bantu-speaking groupings of southern Africa

(1989: 25–29), Lewis-Williams (2000: 32–33) and—for the most comprehensive account—Bank (2006a).

In addition to these mostly anthropological sources I draw on the writings, rich in quantity and quality, of scholars from a number of other disciplines who have worked in the field of Khoisan Studies (many of them drawing on the Bleek/Lloyd archive). These are archaeology, rock art studies and history, as well as folklore, art and literary criticism. The inter-

disciplinarity of source material has also left its imprint on the content and scope of this book, which, in volume two, moves from the San to their Khoe- and Bantu-speaking neighbors in southern Africa, to the Inuit of the eastern Arctic and to the Two Cultures of the West.

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I especially acknowledge the many colleagues and friends whose ideas and counsel I have been able to draw on with respect to this project in discussions, both at home in Canada, or at various conference or guest lecture venues in other countries, and in southern Africa. The former, in alphabetical order, are Leila Baracchini, Alan Barnard, Megan Biesele, Laird Christie, Ute Dieckmann, Thorsten Gieser, Jean-Guy Goulet, Erica Hill, Bob Hitchcock, Rockney Jacobsen, Dean Knight, Tihamer Kover, Frédéric Laugrand, Megan Laws, Jenny Lawy, Richard Lee, Chris Low, Andrew Lyons, Harriet Lyons, Junko Maruyama, Bob McKinley, Mark Münzel, Amali Philips, Sigrid Schmidt, James Serpell, Thea Skaanes, Sian Sullivan, Renee Sylvain, Liz Marshall Thomas, Ingrid Thurner, Thomas Widlok, Rane Willerslev and Sandra Woolfrey.

Before turning to the long list of colleagues from Africa, I acknowledge three special debts of gratitude. They are to Pieter Jolly and Neil Rusch of the University of Cape Town, for inviting me (in October 2017) to accompany them on a field trip to the Northern Karoo, the home territory of //Kabbo, /Han#kasso, Diä!kwain and the other /Xam storytellers from whom Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd obtained their—and the world's—treasure trove of /Xam myth and lore. Apart from viewing many rock art

sites that derive from ancestral /Xam hands and specific features of the landscape that are referred to by the storytellers in one or another tale, this visit afforded me a feel for the landscape—the /Xam *!kau:xu*, or “hunting ground”. Another debt to my two hosts and travel companions is that they gave me permission to use some of their images (photographs and rock art tracings).

At the occasion of that trip to South Africa I also visited David Lewis-Williams, who had invited me to Witwatersrand University’s Rock Art Research Institute (of which he is the founder), as well as showed me around its exhibition at the Institute’s Origins Centre museum. I have admired David’s work on San religion, mythology and art ever since I first became acquainted with it when reading and reviewing his path-breaking *Believing and Seeing* almost four decades ago. I was eager to discuss my current project with him at the occasion of my visit (which, as expected, was most fruitful).

The third debt of gratitude is to the late Irene Staehelin, founder and *spiritus rector*, as well as initial funder, through her Swiss-based UBUNTU Foundation, of !Kwa-ttu, a San culture and education center which, quoting from its mission statement, “celebrates San culture, present and past, for a better future”. This NGO has been able to do all that and more, in the 20 years of its operation. I have been fortunate to be associated with !Kwa-ttu on a couple of occasions. One was in 2011 Irene invited me (along Megan Biesele) to assist in setting up a museum exhibition on /Xam cosmology, around the theme of “The Mantis and the Eland”. It was the discussions, planning and research on this project, and head-long delving into the /Xam Archive, that spawned this book project. Irene, who died early this year (2019), has drawn a number of other San researchers to !Kwa-ttu, to assist and consult, with the salutary effect of making and keeping them aware of problems and issues about the San people that are more real and urgent than so much that “academics” think and write about in academe’s ivory tower.

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NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

All San (and Khoe Khoe) languages include clicks within their inventory of consonants (Guenther 1999: 11). The four that are best defined, phonetically and phonemically, and that appear throughout this book whenever vernacular words, terms and expression are cited are the following:

1. The dental click (/), produced by placing the tip of the tongue against the back of the upper incisors, creating a sound similar to what we transcribe as “tsk, tsk” (the vocalization used when gently chiding a child).
2. The lateral click (/ /), produced by placing the sides of the tongue against the sides of the upper row of teeth, creating the sound a rider makes when urging his/her horse on to greater speed.
3. The alveolar click (‡), produced with the tongue pressed against the bony projection on the roof of the mouth (alveolus).
4. The cerebral (or alveopalatal) click (!), produced by placing the front of the tongue against the roof of the mouth, behind the alveolus, creating a “cork-popping” sound.

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